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Renovating the Closet: Nineteenth-Century Closet Drama Written by Women as a Stage for Social Critique

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Renovating the Closet: Nineteenth-Century Closet Drama Written by Women as a Stage for Social Critique

by

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DISSERTATION

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I dedicate this work to my husband Charles, and to those women who need a nudge to emerge from their own closets.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is more than words on pages, more than years of research, more than a study of a certain genre or time period. This dissertation is more than a career stepping stone, more than a potential book project. This dissertation represents my personal transformation, my journey, my quest. It was unexpected, this dissertation, bringing me new ways of thinking about myself and about others — those alive and those only alive in books. I need to acknowledge the people who supported and advised, who listened and encouraged, who contributed to this wondrous project. Every one of you participated in the enrichment of my self and my world. Unfortunately, I only have the space to thank a handful.

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I can't wait to see where we walk next. Thank you for always being there to take off my dusty boots, and for carrying me across one threshold after another when I have faltered. I love you so much.

Preface

On an airplane from Daytona Beach, Florida to Austin, I came across a poem written by blogger, essayist, and poet Rebecca Woolf in an advertisement in the May 2009 issue of *Oprah* magazine.[1] Though it is not the way I originally intended to begin this dissertation, the poem seems a fitting way to lead into my work on the figurative and literal closets that nineteenth-century women were restricted by and fought to open, as reflected in three closet dramas written by women of the period: *The Spanish Gypsy* by George Eliot, *Stephania* by Michael Field, and *A Woman Sold* by Augusta Webster. Incredibly, Woolf's twenty-first century poem illustrates the contemporary relevance of the thematic messages I highlight in my study of these works.

> We're a generation of List-makers & Jugglers,
> women who wear many hats.
> Perhaps, we should reserve on our
> lists of things to do today, a bullet point for ourselves.
> A place in our closets for a hat that says
> not "mother" or "wife" or "writer" but
> "your name here."
> Not to mention a fabulous
> party to wear it to.

[1] See Fig. 1 for a reproduction of the actual poem.

I want to hone in on the phrase, "a place in our closets." I imagine an overstuffed storage space with shoes and clothes and boxes and mementoes filling every nook and cranny. The speaker suggests that women should shove these things aside to find a place in their closets, make room for a hat. Could be feathered, felt, or a fedora. It doesn't matter. What matters is the embroidery. Not "mother" or "wife" or even "writer." But "your name here." The speaker makes a contrast in these labels. "Mother," "wife," even "writer" are terms others use to name a woman, while "your name here" implies that a woman must name, embroider, herself. "Your name here." It can be anything, multiple things at once, whatever a woman wishes. It is a conscious act, this self-naming, just like reserving a bullet point on a list of things to do is a conscious act. The poem offers the idea that women should find a spatial and metaphorical place in their lives for reclaiming and renaming their "hats," or their identities, and mark that place with an event — a fabulous party — where they can celebrate this reclamation. Yet, if we look closely at Woolf's poem, that reclaimed hat is not actively "worn," but still remains in the closet. The speaker's message is "perhaps, we should." A hesitance, a wondering, a measuring. However, in the closet, there is potential for action.

Like George Eliot, Michael Field, and Augusta Webster, Rebecca Woolf suggests that for a generation, the public casting of women's identities and performances have influenced the private casting of women's identities and performances. For Woolf, women's closets are filled with many hats embroidered by others. For Woolf, a woman's awareness of her given clutter and

her first step toward clearing it away both begin in the closet. With my work on the nineteenth-century closet dramas *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold*, I show that this theme runs deeper and longer than a single generation of women. I show how Eliot, Field, and Webster, in revising the epic, Roman history, and biblical mythology through the closet drama, called attention to the spatial and metaphorical closets that limited social and cultural possibilities for nineteenth century women and created female protagonists who confront patriarchal belief systems, institutions, and conventions that define and restrict their gender roles, sexual identity, and social power. Certainly, Fedalma in *The Spanish Gypsy* may not fully succeed in growing a future for her gypsy nation, but she does take her place as their leader. Certainly, Stephania in *Stephania* may not lead Rome to glory, but she does oust an Emperor from a position he stole by murdering her husband. Certainly, Eleanor in *A Woman Sold* must spend years of her life unhappily married, but through that experience realizes the wider meaning of love. All three characters take action, take steps to renaming themselves, and are made aware of the sociocultural ideologies that underscore the names or roles they have chosen for themselves. Potential for change.

Interestingly enough, this potential for change, the exciting possibility of a new role, inspired me to act, to write my own closet dramas, all derived from my extensive research on Michael Field and staged at intimate theatrical spaces in Austin. In my first, "A Question of Memory," self-performed at the Cohen New Works Festival, I explored, in a fifteen-minute one-act, my

auto/biographical connection to the archival and creative material of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the two women who wrote dramas and poetry using the name Michael Field. In my second, "The Oneness of Two: Re-membering Michael Field," embodied by actors of the Bare Bones New Works Festival hosted at the Vortex Theater, I turned again to Bradley's and Cooper's personal correspondence to imagine a dialogue between the two women and their literary persona, Michael Field. For my third, however, "The Angels of the House," I wrote and produced a full-length play that leaned more toward "Michael Field's" biography and enlisted the help of director Susan Todd and an all-women's theater group, The Weird Sisters, to bring the story to life.[2]

Though all three plays thematically emphasized the fantastic waltz of public and private that characterized Bradley's and Cooper's creative and personal lives together, "The Angels of the House" dealt with the notion of the closet on a number of levels. Spatially, the play was performed in an old, beautiful classroom on the UT campus, with wood paneling and a tall, imposing armoire tucked into the corner. We closed the heavy shutters during performance, darkening the space and keeping the audience as shut away as those characters on stage. Since we had limited room for exits and entrances, the armoire became a space of waiting for the servants and other actors, a literal closet from which they had to emerge when called upon to act. As the character of Michael Field longed to take his/her place in the public eye, he/she

[2]See the Appendix to this dissertation for more on this play, as well as the performance script.

paced back and forth along the wide wooden windowsills high above the stage, yet never was allowed to leave. Metaphorically, the play flirted with lesbian themes and homosexually-oriented closets as Bradley and Cooper expressed their desires for each other and as Cooper became emotionally involved with one of the young female servants, Josephine. The closet, in its multiple manifestations, was the birthplace of Bradley and Cooper's identity as Michael Field, of Michael Field him/herself, and of women's agency.

The narratives, characters, and themes of my original plays illustrate in varying degrees and manners the definitions of the nineteenth-century closet and closet drama that I offer in this dissertation. These works, along with Rebecca Woolf's poem as part of a full-page advertisement in *Oprah* magazine, also mark the fact that, even in the twenty-first-century, women are still struggling to escape the same types of closets; that the themes of identity, choice, action, and desire still resound deep within women; that women must remember that they are not named, but must name themselves. Although Bradley and Cooper had a penchant for gloriously decorated hats, their creative achievement grew from the unique hat they embroidered together and wore proudly: Michael Field. With this note, I invite you to join my conversation about "Renovating the Closet" as portrayed in nineteenth-century closet drama written by women.

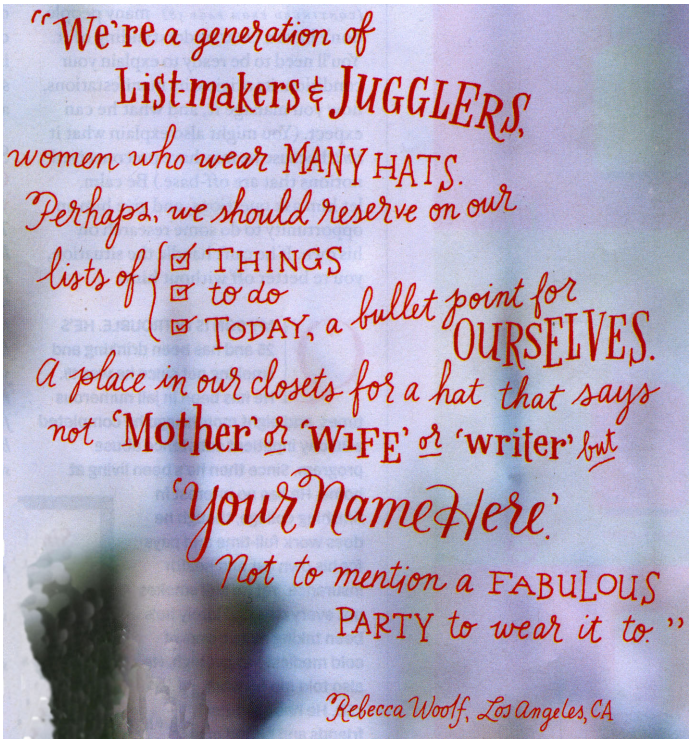

Figure 1: *Turning Leaf* advertisement, Oprah Magazine, May 2009.

Renovating the Closet: Nineteenth-Century Closet Drama Written by Women as a Stage for Social Critique

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My dissertation, "Renovating the Closet: Nineteenth-Century Closet Drama Written by Women as a Stage for Social Critique," contributes to a new understanding about nineteenth-century closet drama through three distinct and innovative texts: George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), Michael Field's *Stephania* (1892), and Augusta Webster's *A Woman Sold* (1867). I contend that these three women writers employed the closet drama, a genre written in dramatic form but intended to be privately read or performed, to critique the social, cultural, and ideological limitations placed upon women of their time. In their symbolic use of the genre and innovative experiments with form, Eliot, Field, and Webster created a new stage on which their female protagonists challenge belief systems, institutions, and conventions that confine their gender roles, sexual identity, and social power.

My chapter, "'Angel of the Homeless Tribe': The Legacy of *The Spanish Gypsy*," shows how George Eliot melds the conventions of epic narrative with those of Victorian closet drama and reveals a dynamic connection between the character development and genre. Eliot's canonical novels are famous for their indictment of the limited roles Victorian culture offered to women. Equally famous are the tragic destinies of her rebellious heroines: they end up dead, unfulfilled, or virtually imprisoned. But scholars have failed to notice that in her experiment with *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot created a female epic: Fedalma, a woman of fifteenth-century Spain, becomes the leader of her "Gypsy" nation, sung into the future by an admiring bard. Eliot's formal experiment makes *The Spanish Gypsy* an important text for understanding how genre shaped gender representation in Eliot's canon, and in Victorian literature generally. My chapter, "'Something of His Manhood Falls': Stephania as Critique of Victorian Male Aesthetics and Masculinity," offers *Stephania* as Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper's commentary on the predominantly-male Aesthetic and Decadent movements of the 1890s. Through the pseudonym Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper wrote their way into, and claimed their own space inside, a very exclusive males-only closet. The chapter demonstrates how *Stephania*, set in Rome 1002 A.D., reclaims agency for a Victorian artistic "sisterhood" adulterated and exiled by a "brotherhood" of male Decadents (who saw woman as a nemesis to social order, personal salvation, and creative production), both through its form, and its cast of three: Stephania, Emperor Otho, and his old tutor Gerbert. Stephania, a

former Empress turned courtesan bent on revenge for her husband's murder, challenges homosocial exclusivity and ultimately triumphs as a symbolic queen and emperor. Successful in her plan to bring down Otho through her seduction and manipulation of both men, Stephania is redeemed and saved; she has restored social order. In its resistance of the boundaries and expectations of the closet drama genre, *Stephania* projects a new ideology for Victorian womanhood and female authorship. My last chapter, "'I Could Be Tempted': The Ev(e)olution of the Angel in the House in *A Woman Sold*," presents *A Woman Sold* as an early example of Augusta Webster's strategic social rhetoric, as her use of the closet drama acts as a structural metaphor for the sociomythological confinement of the nineteenth-century middle class woman. I investigate how *A Woman Sold* exposes the notion that marriage for nineteenth-century middle class women symbolized a closet of social and cultural paralysis, as grown from a history of socially and culturally institutionalized gender expectations. At the same time, I demonstrate how Webster employs irony through a nexus of genre, narrative, and form to support and advocate for opportunities outside marriage that encourage female agency to develop.

Essentially, the fundamental argument in this dissertation hinges on the ways in which Eliot, Field, and Webster revised the conventional closet drama to renovate and, in turn, reveal the metaphorical and literal closets that confined social and cultural possibilities for nineteenth-century women.

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The Paradoxical "Cultural Field" of Closet Drama: Introduction

> The spatial and metaphorical construction of private domestic space is thus fundamentally paradoxical: the gestures of privacy (concealment, withdrawal, control of access) only become meaningful if they are discernable to others.
> (Marta Straznicky, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama: 1550-1700*)

> [T]he closet play — as discursive formation and as material object — is situated in a cultural field in which private and public are shifting rather than fixed points of reference.
> (Straznicky, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama: 1550-1700*)

> Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong.
> (Tzvetan Todorov, "The Origin of Genres")

This dissertation is about how three nineteenth-century British women writers used the closet drama, a genre written in dramatic form but meant to

be privately read or performed, not only to call attention to the social, cultural, and ideological limitations placed upon women of their time, but also to portray women breaking through those limitations and moving toward the possibility of personal development, action, and redemption. The female protagonists in George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), Michael Field's *Stephania* (1892), and Augusta Webster's *A Woman Sold* (1867) each face a future seemingly pre-determined by patriarchal, homosocial, and misogynist ideals, but ultimately reclaim ownership of that future. In these three dramas, this struggle of a woman taking hold of her own identity begins in the closet, defined by Marta Straznicky in her study of early modern closet drama written by women as representative of "private domestic space" in both a "spatial and metaphorical" sense. The closet adopts various manifestations in the three texts I have mentioned, from the figurative — for example, the institution of marriage and the idea of filial duty in *The Spanish Gypsy* and *A Woman Sold* or the disguise of a courtesan in *Stephania* — to the literal, such as the palaces in *The Spanish Gypsy* and *Stephania* or the middle-class domestic space in *A Woman Sold*.

In this dissertation, I use Straznicky's definition of "closet," as well as the formal taxonomy of the word "closet" offered by the OED and the more visionary "epistemology of the closet" conceptualized by Eve Sedgwick in her work of the same name, to qualify the material and metaphorical characteristics of the closet inhabited by the female protagonists of *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold*, in addition to those of the closets inhabited by

the Victorian woman herself. The OED's definition of the closet leans toward the physical:

1. (a) A room for privacy or retirement; a private room; an inner chamber.

   (b) Such a room as the place of private devotion.

   (c) As the place of private study or secluded speculation; esp. in reference to mere theories as opposed to practical measures.

2. (a) The private apartment of a monarch or potentate; the private council-chamber; a room in a palace used by the sovereign for private or household devotions.

   (b) A pew in the chapel of a castle occupied by the lord and his family, or in a Chapel Royal by the Royal family.

3. (a) A private repository of valuables or (esp. in later use) curiosities; a cabinet.

   (b) A small side-room or recess for storing utensils, provisions, etc.; a cupboard.

   (c) A skeleton in the closet (or cupboard): a private or concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view.

   (d) To come out of the closet: to admit (something) openly, to cease to conceal, esp. one's homosexuality.

4. With special reference to size: Any small room: especially one belonging to or communicating with a larger.

5. The den or lair of a wild beast.

6. That which affords retirement like a private chamber, or which encloses like a cabinet; a hidden or secret place, retreat, recess.

7. Short for Closet of ease, water-closet.

8. (a) In reference to the closet as a place of privacy, the word was formerly almost adjectival = Private.

   (b) Secret, covert, used esp. with reference to homosexuality; closet queen, a secret male homosexual.[1]

The OED, for the most part, pinpoints the closet as a private, domestic space for worship, thought, or storage, an image that I will repeatedly return to in this dissertation. However, I must acknowledge and incorporate the notional description of the closet provided in lines 3.c)"A skeleton in the closet (or cupboard): a private or concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view."; 3.d) "To come out of the closet: to admit (something) openly, to cease to conceal, esp. one's homosexuality."; and 8.b) "Secret, covert, used esp. with reference to homosexuality; closet queen, a secret male homosexual." Of course, the idea of the closet as

[1]I edited the OED definition here, removing the indicators of types or parts of speech, places of origin, and other abbreviations to focus on the meaning of the word "closet" itself.

a site of concealment, withholding, and secrecy, especially in the context of homosexuality, undoubtedly invites contextualization with Sedgwick's groundbreaking *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), in which she considers the closet as a "publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues" (14), particularly due to the sociocultural assignation of the term "homosexual"[2] during the late nineteenth-century, which instigated a systemic trend of homophobia that continued into the twentieth century and inspired her pointed "line of antihomophobic inquiry" (2). Certainly the dramatic conflicts at the heart of *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold* reflect Sedgwick's theory about the binarized institutional power structure erected from the late nineteenth-century sociocultural designation of the term "homosexual" as classification of a behavior subordinate and in contrast to "heterosexual" (2). Indeed, each of the dramas that comprise the focus of this dissertation mark the site of an individual's struggle against governing systems (social, political, cultural, religious, and so forth) in claiming and naming their own identity.

In this dissertation, however, I keep Sedgwick's theory just outside my argument. I view the logical first step in this particular query of how Victorian women writers used the closet drama genre to identify the closet as reflective of a social, cultural, historical, and mythological "performance" space for nineteenth-century women as the laying of groundwork: in imagining this field of study as a closet itself, dark and deep, I see my argument

[2]The term "homosexual" was first mentioned officially in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*(1892).

here as addressing and generating the necessary, even broad, questions about what the closet drama genre provided nineteenth-century women writers that other genres could not. I see these questions leading beyond this study toward more complicated interrogations, ones which use Sedgwick's "antihomophobic inquiry" of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts to further illuminate the "open secret" of desire and sexuality that anchors the narratives and overall character development of *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold*, as well as other nineteenth-century closet dramas written by women. Though already intrigued by what the rich complexities of Sedgwick's homosexually-oriented metaphor of the closet can offer, I deem it crucial to start with a simpler grounding of the closet drama genre and of Eliot's, Field's, and Webster's employ of that genre, as related to their textual interpretations of the "closet" role given to, and played by, the nineteenth-century woman.

Although Marta Straznicky included the definitions that begin this introduction in her study of early modern closet drama, her remarks best describe the manner in which I define "closet" for the purposes of this dissertation and speak to heart of my argument about Victorian closet drama. She suggests that women between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries wrote "closet plays," or what I will refer to as closet drama, because the genre, meant to be read silently or aloud, internalized or performed, allowed women authors to enter this "shifting" "paradoxical" "cultural field," this private domestic space where they could engage with mental and physical concepts on a number of levels, both privately and publicly. Straznicky

maintains the importance of recognizing those private and public boundaries, no matter how permeable, as intrinsic to the identity of the closet drama and as vital to rhetorical interpretation of the work itself (3). My study of the nineteenth-century closet drama aligns with what Straznicky implies about the early modern closet drama and focuses on two main points: 1) the notion that "gestures" of the closet or "private domestic space" seem to only have value in the eyes of "others," or society at large, is one that still affects and restricts women's lives centuries later; and 2) women writers of the nineteenth-century, in the tradition of their female forebears, rhetorically used the closet drama genre to reveal the closet or "private domestic space" as a public "field" or stage on which women had to perform sociomythologically and culturally-determined roles, namely the angel in the house, the femme fatale, the widow, the wife, and the whore, among others. But while Straznicky's investigation focuses on the motivation and strategy of early modern women authors in writing closet drama, in my study of *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold*, I turn toward the theory of Tzvetan Todorov, which I also used to open this introduction, and the way genres reveal "the constitutive features of the society to which they belong" (200) in my examination of the closet drama as a structural and thematic metaphor which signifies the central conflict in the lives of both the titular female protagonists at the core of each of these texts and the nineteenth-century woman.

Though already a common concept in the early modern period, the assignment of distinct roles for men and women became a popular theme in

the nineteenth-century, with men socially assigned to be the guardians of political and economic affairs and women designated as angels of the household. As such, women became the site of cultivation for morality, virtue, and peace befitting nationhood and empire — representative of the desire for the greater good; a communal, public desire. By experimenting with the form of the traditional closet drama in their telling of women-centered narratives, Eliot, Field, and Webster created room for their female protagonists to recognize their personal, private desires in their pursuit of the greater good and to consider unconventional options for their futures. In essence, this dissertation is about how nineteenth-century women writers in their renovation of the closet drama attempted to rhetorically reform the dogmatic construction of the Victorian woman's closet itself. In this introduction, I will build a foundation for my argument by first, briefly reporting on the state of contemporary criticism on closet drama; second, establishing the definition and historical context of closet drama for the purposes of this dissertation; and third, providing an overview of the core issue that will be examined in each chapter.

With this dissertation, I hope to enhance the arguments made over the last several decades by scholars like Terry Otten, Alan Richardson, Shou-Ren Wang, Marta Straznicky, Karen Raber, Catherine Burroughs, Katherine Newey, and Susan Brown, who have been making great strides in illuminating the history, politics, dramaturgy, and metatheatrical aspects of the closet drama genre. In the 1970s, Otten drew attention to the nineteenth-century closet drama in his book about the *Deserted Stage*, in which he discusses the

way poets like Shelley, Tennyson, Byron, and Browning were innovators in the genre, with a goal to "embody subjective action in dramatic form" (10) or to move the dramatic focus toward character development. The 1980s included scholarship by Richardson, who wanted to differentiate Romantic "mental theater" from closet drama by marking mental theater as "a tragedy of consciousness" as opposed to a what he saw as dramaturgically viable historical tragedy (175). A decade later, Wang continued to discuss the *Theatre of the Mind* and the work of Shelley, Browning, and Byron, among other male authors, and made it a point to describe mental theater as "unacted drama" because of its subjective content. Not until the twentieth century did work on women closet dramatists emerge, with Burrough's study of Joanna Baillie's dramaturgical innovations on *Closet Stages* of the Romantic period, which cut a path to twenty-first-century study by Straznicky, Raber, Newey, and Brown. These critics of women's closet drama broadened a field of study formerly focused on dramas written by, and about, men and began to explore how women incorporated the connections between the mind and the body into a genre that previous scholars like Richardson and Wang were isolating in their "mental" and "unacted" classification.

Despite the different critical approaches, this "closet drama revisionism," as Burroughs considers the movement, examines the value in the tension that inherently exists in the closet drama, a genre that has been critically and historically wedged between, and bound by the characteristics of, drama and literature (Burroughs 179). Because of its positioning on the cusp of, and its

equal potential for falling into, these two categories often seen by critics as oppositional and exclusive, the closet drama has generated much debate about not only where it belongs in terms of categorization, but also its value in terms of both canonical study and performability.[3] The closet drama's simultaneous shouldering against and merging with drama and literature points to what Straznicky marked as a "shifting" of public and private and generates a complicated, slippery rhetoric that defies classification. This uncertainty about whether to read, perform, and situate the closet drama publicly or privately has resonated in the multitude of synonymous designations associated with the genre, a list which includes mental theater, private theatricals, unacted theater, verse drama, poetic drama, dramatic poetry, and lyric drama. The inconsistent terminology arose based on how a critic viewed a work's level of peformability, its lyricism, and its subject matter, thus reflecting and contributing to the resistance with which early critics engaged with the genre.[4]

[3]The emphasis on a character's emotions as the source of plot created the division between what were considered successful "acting plays" as opposed to unsuitable "dramatic poems," as so-called by an anonymous reviewer of Louisa Jane Hall's *Miriam* (1837), who introduces his/her critique by reaffirming and clarifying the differences between the two genres (*North American Review* 314). The reviewer asserts that acting plays emphasize drama, whereas dramatic poetry emphasizes language (*North American Review* 315). Dramatic poems, the reviewer suggests, also allow for "licenses in ornament, in description, in rhetoric, in digression" which would be inappropriate and untranslatable on the stage (*North American Review* 315). In other words, audiences would lose interest as the drama digressed into what they viewed as extraneous emoting versus actual plot. Contemporary critic Thomas Crochinus in "Dramatic Closet at the Present Time" claims that the way "critics and readers received a writer's plays was influenced by public discourse about that writer's relationship to both the stage and the closet" (para. 2).

[4]While the OED defines closet drama simply as "a play intended to be read rather than performed; such plays collectively," another source positions the genre as "[a] literary composition written in the form of a play (usually as a dramatic poem), but intended

Ultimately, all of these terms grew to include and deny each other, and this lack of stability in classification led to a lack of understanding about the genre which is only now, and in recent years, gaining interest for its instability.

While I see the value in a study of the nuances in the terminology that maps the epistemology of the closet drama, particularly as it would fill in the sketchy history of a multi-faceted genre long neglected, for my argument in this dissertation, I turn to the basic definition Catherine Burroughs gives in her study of Romantic closet drama:

> [W] ritten to resemble a play script and therefore implying a potential theatrical performance, the closet play makes dramaturgically explicit the bifurcated character of all dramatic literature, tensed between script and live performance. (16)

This definition, like Straznicky's, captures the general essence of the closet drama in its inclusivity and exclusivity, its shifting of private and public: Burroughs pointedly identifies the closet drama as a text "written to resemble a

— or suited — only for reading in a closet (i.e., a private study) rather than for stage performance" (Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms). Here, "a play" becomes a "dramatic poem," a valuation established with regard to dramatic and poetic qualities as the core of the work is marked a poem and its type identified as dramatic. But dramatic poetry can be defined as "lyrics or short poems that imply a scene"; "plays that are valorized with the adjective 'poetic' "; and "dramas whose dialogue is calculatingly rhymed — in rhythms that are often regularized into meters and that are usually presented as discreet lines on the page," in addition to "verse drama . . . conceived for performance" (Brogan 57). At the same time, some resources also claim that poetic drama "is not identical with dramatic poetry, which also includes verse compositions not suited for the stage, such as closet dramas" (Oxford Dictionary, emphasis mine). I cannot begin in this dissertation or this introduction to untangle the different and circular arguments scholars have made about the closet drama, but I do believe that the debate is a vital one to acknowledge in future study.

play script," yet acknowledges the stress and slippage between written "script and live performance." But in order to successfully analyze the particular nineteenth-century works featured in this dissertation, it is important for me to amend Burroughs' definition by identifying several elements deemed common to the closet drama written in the nineteenth-century, namely 1) its emphasis on psychological exploration or personal philosophies of male protagonists or its male author, 2) its tendency toward historical, mythical, or supernatural subjects, 3) its large cast of characters, 4) its long speeches, and 5) its use of blank verse rather than ordinary dialect.

To support and illustrate my criteria, I will provide a quick historical identification and positioning of the closet drama in the nineteenth-century. During that time, audiences demanded action on stage, and with the over-the-top happenings of melodrama, the excitement of music halls, and plays that addressed and grappled with social issues of popular concern, drama heavy on character development seemed stagnant and consequently lost its appeal (Otten 4). Romantic writers, frustrated creatively by what they viewed as deterioration in the quality of writing for the stage, began to experiment, moving toward a deeper, more philosophical approach to action through an exploration of the self or the a quest for lost morality, what Wang calls the "ascendancy of character" (201).[5] Robert Browning addressed this creative switch in direction in the dedication to his first historical tragedy *Strafford* (1837), emphasizing "Action in character, not Character in Action" and implying the "action" of

[5]Also see Burroughs' *Closet Stages* (9) and Otten's *Deserted Stages* (3–5).

the text erupts from internal rather than external conflict — a struggle of the self and the soul, rather than of the self against society. While *Strafford* and plays with similar internal leanings such as Tennyson's *Maud* (1855) eventually were staged, critics and audiences found the style appropriate for readers, but too cerebral for audiences. Additionally, many of the dramas had a long list of characters and rapid and elaborate scene changes, which made staging difficult and expensive.[6] Browning's *Strafford* fell into both categories. With a cast of 17 major characters and a slew of minor ones, the drama was based on events in the life of Thomas Wentworth (Earl of Strafford), a famous English statesman of the seventeenth century, but Browning's strategy was not to conventionally dramatize the political exploits of Wentworth's biography. Instead, the drama grew from Browning's characters and their personal feelings about a situation.[7] A look at Pym, a Parliamentary leader and Strafford's political opponent, when he speaks to Strafford/Wentworth in the final act of the drama about betraying their friendship for his own political gain, illustrates Browning's emotional focus:

> Have I done well? Speak England! Whose sole sake
> I still have laboured for, with disregard

[6]For a critical opinion about *Strafford* that seems to reflect the common opinion at the turn of the century about this type of "mental" drama, see Stopford Augustus Brooke's *The Poetry of Robert Browning* (London, Bath, NY: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1911) 219-228.

[7]In an 1892 edition of *Strafford*, Samuel L. Gardiner states in the introduction that "[t]he interest of politics is mainly indirect" (xiii). He also suggests that Browning "abandoned all attempt to be historically accurate" and did so in order to achieve "higher truth in character" (xiv).

> To my own heart, — for whom my youth was made
> Barren, my manhood waste, to offer up
> Her sacrifice — this friend, this Wentworth here —
> Who walked in youth with me, loved me, it may be[.]
> [. . .] And, saying this, I feel
> No bitterer pang than first I felt, the hour
> I swore Wentworth might leave us, but I
> Would never leave him: I do leave him now.
> [. . .] — for I am weak, a man:
> Still, I have done my best, my human best,
> Not faltering for a moment.
> [. . .] Ay, here I know I talk — I dare and must,
> Of England, and her great reward, as all
> I look for there: but in my inmost heart,
> Believe, I think of stealing quite away[.] (268–296)

Though one speech among many in the play and obviously taken out of context, this monologue punctuates a sudden confrontation between two former friends, yet the focus is on internal action rather than external action. Although Pym says that he has "laboured" for England in his political machinations "with disregard for [his] own heart," he goes on to reveal how his labor for England has left his youth "barren, [his] manhood waste," youth and manhood both abstractions. He literally "feel[s]," as signposted by the seventh line (and repeated in various conjugations), that he is "weak" and, in the end, sees in his "inmost heart" his truest desire of "stealing away" and forgetting all. Pym

and Strafford/Wentworth continue an emotional exchange to the last lines of the drama, clasping each other in the throes of forgiveness as Strafford goes to his execution. Despite being derived from a history structured by political maneuvers, the drama ends with a scene not about political triumph, but about a friendship lost to political triumph — an emotional loss.

Some writers had immediately realized that the psychological orientation of their work would not be not appreciated by theater-goers and decided their work deserved a better venue than the "sinking stage" (Wang 6), as Byron remarked in 1812 during a speech he gave on opening night of the new Drury Lane theater. Dismissive of the stage and its audiences, Byron privileged what he named "mental theater" (Wang 12), a work written to be appreciated by the solitary reader (Wang xi). In Byron's *Manfred* (1816), protagonist Manfred is in anguish over a possibly incestuous relationship with his sister Astarte, who died as a result, and invokes spirits to help him forget. When they cannot help him, he tries to stop his thoughts by attempting suicide, but fails when Fate intervenes. Written in blank verse, the narrative of *Manfred* turns on the overwhelming power of a man's psyche as its main conflict, as manifested through the supernatural and mythical. Early lines of Act One establish the premise:

> My slumbers — if I slumber — are not sleep,
> But a continuance of enduring thought,
> Which then I can resist not: in my heart
> There is a vigil, and these eyes but close

To look within; and yet I live, and bear
The aspect and the form of breathing men. (I, 3–8)

Immediately, Byron introduces Manfred's conflict: his never-ending "enduring thought" that keeps him mentally awake. Manfred continues for 41 more lines; "in [his] mind there is/A power" (I, 15-16), and he calls to the "Spirits of the unbounded Universe" (I, 29), compelling them to appear by "[t]he thought which is within [him] and around [him]" (I, 48) and to help him forget his angst. From the start, Manfred acts inside his mind, his ultimate goal to make his internal conflict disappear.

Returning to the five-pronged amendment I made to the closet drama definition offered by Burroughs, I am interested in the ways nineteenth-century women writers adopted some of the traditional elements of Romantic "mental theater" while adapting others. I begin with my first point: the male-centric scope of the Romantics. Just as Browning, Tennyson, Byron, and others depicted psychological drama as a personal, mental "closet" to thematically explore and thus composed solipsistic drama classified by critics as best suited to be read alone in a private domestic space, or physical closet, women writers also used the genre to call attention to and explore the psyche and domestic space. However, the private navel-gazing of their female protagonists did not lead to the personal anguish found in the depths of the soul, but rather to the personal freedom and social engagement found in the exposure and reformation of ideological, psychological, even physical, closets which restricted social and cultural possibilities for their gender. I chose works by Eliot, Field, and

Webster as revisionary examples of how women saw the closet drama not as a venue for inward-thinking but outward mobility, as their protagonists grow toward moments of self-awareness and take risks for their future. In all three texts, Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, Field's *Stephania*, and Webster's *A Woman Sold*, the emotional conflict of the female protagonist inspires her to act in her society, rather than withdraw from it. Unlike Byron's Manfred, who longs for "self-oblivion" (I, 145), all of the female protagonists of the closet dramas discussed in this dissertation work through their psychological discord, an action which makes them evaluate and challenge the restrictive choices regarding their gender roles, sexual identity, and social power. These protagonists, by facing and exploring their emotions, claim a physical connection to, and agency in, the world around them and represent potential change for women on and off the page. The closet drama allowed Eliot, Field, and Webster to create opportunities, situations, and destinies for their female protagonists in ways that other genres could not.

This idea draws me back to the rest of the points I included in my amendment to Burroughs' closet drama definition: though the three authors took on different forms and themes and varied their prosody as well as the size of their cast of characters, they all, like their male counterparts, abandoned in varying degrees the popular style of realism, or a style that looked toward an authentic and unidealized portrayal of life (OED). But these women writers used history, mythology, and mysticism not to emphasize the genre's mental focus or their protagonist's lack of real-world engagement, but instead to shed

light on prescriptives and issues which had the power to form and reform the identity — physical and figurative — of women. Mary Eagleton, in "Genre and Gender," suggests that "[n]on-realist forms [of writing] permit the woman writer to express the contradictions, fantasies or desires that the demands of realism silence" (253). Though Eagleton refers to "modernist or avant-garde forms of writing" and even *l'écriture feminine* (253), I aim to illustrate in this dissertation that the three works by Eliot, Field, and Webster indeed "express the contradictions, fantasies, or desires" of their female protagonists, particularly those "that the demands of realism silence." In the reality of the patriarchal, misogynist society of the nineteenth-century, the corporeal existence of women was commonly recognized as either angel or whore, or, by and large, women were not physically recognized, or heard, at all. While Eliot, Field, and Webster acknowledged the growing trend of realism in other work, they used the non-realism of the closet drama, ironically, to give their female protagonists presence, power, and voice.

Each chapter of this dissertation highlights the distinct choices Eliot, Field, and Webster made in reforming the closet drama genre. In *On Form*, Angela Leighton describes form as "the distribution of space caused by edging one thing against another, so that each calls attention to the other" (16). She sees form as not "a fixed shape to be seen, but the shape of a choice to be made" (16). In each chapter, I focus on the "shape" of those choices made by each author, and how the spaces — literal and metaphorical — "cal[l] attention" to, or contextualize, not only each other, but also the narrative, the

characters, and the genre as a whole. I also touch back on an idea Otten posed in his study of what he saw as the innovative literary drama of the nineteenth-century: how the "primarily subjective or internal action in each play forced its poet to experiment with new structural forms or drastically to modify orthodox dramatic form" (12). Like Otten's decades ago, my thesis deals with how a protagonist's internal action — her spaces, her choices, her closets — demanded a "new structural form," a new "fixed shape," a new authorial choice in modifying the closet drama. With that in mind, I evaluate the texts in this dissertation not in chronological order, but rather in an order that pulls attention to the way each drama's form signals the connection between the author's formal use of nonrealism and their female protagonist's level of mobility. I am interested in discovering if the farther an author strays from formal realism, the larger potential for public impact their female protagonist's choices have in their fictional worlds.

By the same token, I am also interested in discovering through the analysis of these closet dramas if the more impact the female protagonist's actions have in a world of nonrealism, the stronger an author's critique about the "less real" potential the Victorian woman has to effect a significant public change from a position of authority. In examining *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold* in that order — from the drama I see as constructed with the fewest elements of formal realism to the drama possessing the most — I aim for a reading of these texts that identifies them as important portals to a more expansive study of how the act of revising the closet drama for women

writers of the nineteenth-century seemed to serve as a conscious, formal way to suggest that the only way a woman of the Victorian period could revise her role in the closet into one of authority and power was to revise the history and the belief systems that led her there.

The Spanish Gypsy: The Epic Closet

Although George Eliot drew success from the novel form, she made a conscious decision to depart from that genre in constructing *The Spanish Gypsy*, the tale of a fifteenth-century young woman who, though raised in a Spanish palace, discovers she is a Gypsy princess and must choose between her love for a Spanish knight and her allegiance to her father, who wants her help in leading the Gypsy nation toward their future outside of Spain. The unusual form of *The Spanish Gypsy*, a hybrid of prose, poetry, and drama, has been critically mentioned, but as a focus of study has been strangely ignored. In 2008, Antonie Gerard van den Broek edited the scholarly edition of *The Spanish Gypsy*, including Eliot's various drafts, but analysis was spare. Critics like Deborah Nord, Michael Ragussis, Victor Neufeldt, and Brenda McKay have looked at the *The Spanish Gypsy* through the lenses of race, nationalism, memory, and identity, while others have evaluated *The Spanish Gypsy* against Eliot's novels, often treating the work as little more than a testing ground for ideas, themes, characters, and plots for Eliot's future texts like *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*. While it is important to explore the ways in which *The Spanish Gypsy* relates to and lends new understanding of Eliot's other texts, *The Spanish Gypsy* should not be regarded as a secondary

afterthought or an anomaly in comparison to those works.

In *Middlemarch*, the narrator says in the Prelude that no woman torn between "self-despair" and the "rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" has had an "epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion" (3). As a closet drama infused with elements of the epic, *The Spanish Gypsy* proposes that a woman's internal conflicts, conflicts that arise from her thinking about and challenging the covenants of patriarchal society, can indeed set her on a heroic quest of "spiritual grandeur" and can offer the chance for "far-resonant action" to be remembered for all time. Eliot connects the narrator of *The Spanish Gypsy* to the tradition of epic storytelling, and subsequently collective memory, and thus mythologizes, memorializes, Fedalma's narrative, joining a woman's private, internal struggle with a public consciousness. Furthermore, the work's title, *The Spanish Gypsy*, makes it clear that this is not a story about an ordinary place (like *Middlemarch* or *The Mill on the Floss*) or an ordinary person (like *Adam Bede* or even *Romola*). The title of *The Spanish Gypsy* emphasizes the protagonist's singularity, her uniqueness; at the same time, she is not specifically named and consequently becomes a symbol, an icon. Thus, Eliot, in fact, becomes the "sacred poet" who keeps the Spanish Gypsy from sinking "unwept into oblivion."

***Stephania*: The Closet of the Empire and Art**

My second chapter offers a new perspective on the critical scholarship of Michael Field (the aunt and niece pairing of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) by evaluating their little-known drama, *Stephania*. Although Field's canon includes 25 dramas, scholars have focused on their lyric poetry, their collaborative relationship as Michael Field, and the homoerotic/homosexual nature of their relationship.[8] On the whole, despite unsubstantial mentions in critical articles, Field's dramatic opus has been unstudied, with the exception of David Moriarty's "Michael Field and Male Critics," which focuses on how men of letters received Field's dramatic work; Holly Laird's "Michael Field as 'the Author of *Borgia*,'" which discusses the post-Michael Field phase of Bradley and Cooper's authorial anonymity; and Vickie L. Taft's "The Tragic Mary: A Case Study in Michael Field's Understanding of Sexual Politics," which looks at *The Tragic Mary* (1890) through a lens of same-sex desire. Both contemporary scholars and turn-of-the-century critics alike have attributed Field's marginal literary success to Bradley's and Cooper's spinsterhood, their gender, their collaboration, and the genres in which they wrote. But I want to recognize *Stephania* as a signpost in a career that would be more and more disregarded, particularly by their literary coterie at the fin de siècle, a coterie

[8]I remark here about Yopie Prins showing how the "homoerotic Sapphism of Michael Field" revises the singularity of authorship associated with the lyric (17); Virginia Blain investigating the problematic "cultural myth, or rather series of myths that have been constructed around the sign of 'Michael Field'" (243); Holly Laird, Bette London, and Lorraine York exposing the complex, creative, feminist, and erotic space of Bradley and Cooper's collaboration; Sharon Bickle recovering the lesbian textuality in the personal correspondence archived at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and Marion Thain examining Field's poetry with an eye to its role in the aesthetic movement.

made up primarily of men notably aligned with the Decadent movement. In my study of *Stephania*, I want to show how Bradley and Cooper alienated this group of Decadent male readers with the story about a former empress in eleventh-century Rome who exacts revenge on the new ruler and his male mentor for murdering her husband and usurping the Empire, an allegory that identified the homosocial/homosexual desires of the male Decadent community as the source of what Bradley and Cooper saw as a nineteenth-century empire of Art in rapid decline.

A Woman Sold: The Closet of Eve and Angels

Much like *Stephania*, *A Woman Sold* has been overshadowed by the study of Webster's poetic canon, which includes lyrics, dramatic monologues, and translations. In this chapter, I want to propose a reading of *A Woman Sold* that not only reveals a new angle to Webster's writing career, but also predicts the rhetoric of irony that she will use in her future essays to champion women's social and political causes. Webster unites the genre, form, and narrative of *A Woman Sold* to project an ironic metanarrative that challenges the literal message of the text: while at its core *A Woman Sold* appears to center on a simple marriage plot about a young woman torn between marrying the man she loves and the wealthy man her parents want her to marry, Webster weaves a subtle allegory that depicts the institution of marriage as a confining closet where her female protagonist is trapped inside the sociomythological constructs of the biblical Eve and the nineteenth-century angel in the house made popular by Coventry Patmore; specifically, marriage in this drama is

portrayed as a bound, restrictive space where the nineteenth-century middle class woman must play the angelic, virtuous role to make amends for Eve's original sin or accept the consequences of causing society's downfall. With her structural choices and allegorical reference, Webster implies that the idea of womanhood in this drama is not new to the nineteenth-century, but began with the birth of humanity itself, and thus proposes that the very nature of a woman's identity and existence has forever been sold on the sociomythology born from patriarchal ideology. At the same time, Webster's revision of the closet drama points the way toward the possibility for female agency to grow outside these ideologically constructed closets.

My purpose in this dissertation is to take a closer, more critical look at *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold*, three works that have been marginalized in their classification, as well as for their unusual forms, in order to widen the scope in the existing analysis of how Victorian women authors contributed to the closet drama genre. Ultimately, I want to offer a new criteria, other than aesthetic, for determining their value and the value of other closet dramas written by Victorian women, especially in viewing the works' varied forms as examples of an inherently inward-focused genre renovated to open a personal, social, and cultural space of mobility for nineteenth-century women. I see the study of these texts as important to furthering the movement of closet drama revisionism and to (re)building the historicization of an oft-ignored genre that bridges traditions of both literature and theater, in order to reveal, through the metaphor of the closet, a critique of the nineteenth-century

woman's designated place in the politics of gender and sexuality.

Chapter 2

"Angel of the Homeless Tribe": The Legacy of *The Spanish Gypsy*

> I want something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view, and something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction.
> (George Eliot, "Leaves from a Notebook," 1884)

In his 1868 review of the *The Spanish Gypsy*, Henry James wrote that until the publication of this particular work, many readers — himself included — "had hitherto only half known George Eliot" and that by "[a]dding this dazzling new half to the old one, readers constructed for a moment a really splendid literary figure" (622). Though James went on to say that the drama's "virtues and failings" (622) ultimately revealed the same "old" Eliot everyone knew, James's initial insight provides an opening for a revised understanding of Eliot's art. Indeed, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) shows a "dazzling new half" of Eliot, one that allows her to be associated with the word "novel," not simply referencing the literary genre but also meaning innovative, unique, even atypical. In writing *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot exchanged her signature realism to write "something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary

historical fiction," or a modified closet drama, an inventive work that shows her challenging both literary and social conventions of the mid-nineteenth-century.

Eliot, in the essay "Leaves from a Notebook" included within a collection published in 1884, asked, "What is the best way of telling a story? Since the standard must be the interest of the audience, there must be several or many good ways rather than one best" (qtd. in Pinney 444). Indeed, with *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot combines "several or many good" storytelling techniques to meet the "interest of the audience." Although Eliot, in the Preface to *The Spanish Gypsy*, notes that she mimicked the "trochaic measure and assonance of the Spanish Ballad," the work is structurally a hybrid of verse, drama, and prose. In this chapter, I want to examine Eliot's unique blend of verse and drama in order to show how the closet drama's infusion of epic elements expands Eliot's authorial identity from novelist to experimental poet/dramatist and revisionary historian. It is no coincidence that *The Spanish Gypsy* exemplifies the organic, variable philosophy reflected in Eliot's "Notes on Form in Art," written the same year *The Spanish Gypsy* was published but printed some time after; in her notes, Eliot discusses the metaphorical, moving boundaries, "the constant interchange of effects," that develop and shape a poetic form (qtd. in Pinney 435). Although the ideas in Eliot's notes can certainly be applied to a study of Eliot's fiction as observed by Eliot scholars Frederick Karl and Thomas Pinney, Eliot wrote her novels with an eye toward a more "realistic treatment" as noted in a letter she wrote to her publisher John

Blackwood in 1861 after the release of the novel *Silas Marner*. Despite the classification of *Silas Marner* as a "legendary tale," one that focused heavily on "the psychology of Silas" himself, Eliot did not think his story expansive enough to warrant a poetic form (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 341). Obviously, for Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy* required a form not bound by realism, a form that could reveal the psychology of its main character and could also hold the "constant interchange of effects" needed to tell a legendary tale — a form united by the genre characteristics of the closet drama and the epic.

Eliot incorporated elements of the outward-seeking epic into the introspective closet drama in order to frame the narrative of Fedalma, the virginal bride of the Spanish knight Don Silva. Believed to have been found as a child by Silva's mother, Fedalma was raised to fulfill the role of the proper Duchess she would some day become as Silva's wife. But when a Spanish captive, the king of the Gypsies (or Zincali, both terms used by Eliot) tells Fedalma she is his daughter and was long ago stolen from their camp, their nation, during a raid, she struggles to determine where she belongs and where her loyalties lie.[1] Fedalma's internal conflict — her initial hesitation over her identity as Silva's wife, her love for Silva, her duty to her father, and the uncertainty that arises from her privately contemplating her complicated circumstances — becomes the impetus for her confrontation of the roles she has been socially and cul-

[1]In this dissertation, when referencing textual details of *The Spanish Gypsy*, I use the terms Eliot herself employs in order to be consistent with the work itself. However, I would like to note that "Romany" or "Romani" is the name preferred for the group in contemporary classification (Nord 18, Hancock xvii).

turally assigned. From options bound by patriarchal prescriptions grows her fated personal quest, as underscored by the merging of the conventional closet drama with qualities of the epic.

In bringing certain characteristics of the epic, a genre of valiant action and adventure, to the closet drama, a genre predicated on private, personal happenings, Eliot metaphorically reclaimed for her female protagonist (and women of her time) the space to actively change her socio-cultural role and to imagine, if only for a time, how that change might impact lives and destinies of a nation. The conventional closet drama of the mid-nineteenth-century, more fully defined in the Introduction of this dissertation, took the form of a dramatic script written in verse for literary purposes or private production. Closet drama narratives usually focused on action often emerging from inner conflict or offered a story too large and complex to be portrayed on an actual stage. Epic convention cast its protagonist as a heroic male figure whose individual mission — his destiny — determines the future of others. His actions decide their fate, which often involves the fate of a nation or race (Brogan 72). Eliot's innovation began when she referenced the male-centered epic in telling the tale of a female protagonist psychologically struggling with her identity and seeking a future where she can satisfy her desires along with everyone else's.

In 1857, Elizabeth Barrett Browning achieved something similar with *Aurora Leigh* by reconstituting the male-orientation of the epic in what critics considered a "novel-poem." As the story of a woman writer trying to find

her identity both socially and professionally, *Aurora Leigh* was modern in setting, relatively autobiographical, and was told using realism, rather than the grand, elevated style of the traditional epic (Brogan 72). Barrett Browning, "distrust[ing] the poet who . . . trundles back his soul five hundred years" (*Aurora Leigh* V, 191) for inspiration, decided to create a contemporary or "living epic" (Friedman 211). Although Barrett Browning wanted to acknowledge an epic woman in, and for, her time and chose to locate the plot of *Aurora Leigh* within the scope of ordinary life, *Aurora Leigh* does resemble *The Spanish Gypsy* in its idea of legacy. Both *Aurora Leigh* and *The Spanish Gypsy* show a woman rising to meet her larger destiny as the leader of a marginalized, even socially invisible, people — women writers for Aurora Leigh, women and "Gypsies" for Eliot's female protagnist Fedalma. As the titular subjects of tales which recall the collective memory of oral tradition, Aurora Leigh and Fedalma symbolically unite and immortalize their respective "nations" by the record of their very existence and experience (though fictional) and become cultural figureheads and/or matriarchs. Yet at the end of her story, unlike Aurora Leigh, Fedalma is not relegated to a future of marriage.[2]

In this chapter, I want to argue that Eliot's formal revision of the closet drama genre helps construct a female protagonist unlike any of her others, one who has the opportunity to make a social, cultural, and historical impact within her world, one who — despite her social casting as both angel in the

[2]See the chapter in this dissertation on Augusta Webster for a more detailed view of nineteenth-century marriage.

house and exotic other — presses against her domestic confines and moves toward a sense of independence and agency. While Barrett Browning used qualities of the novel, a "female-coded" genre, to revise the epic, Eliot turned away from the medium in which she primarily worked. For *The Spanish Gypsy*, she went outside the "home epic" (a term for her novels which she coined in *Middlemarch* [1871]) to ultimately settle on the closet drama. At the time, women writers like Augusta Webster were putting a twist on the closet drama much in the way Barrett Browning did with the epic, using contemporary settings and topics to show "middle-class Victorian women as split subjects" (Brown 104) torn between their individual desires and social duty as a women. While Eliot did choose a present-day setting and context for her closet drama *Armgart* (1871), about a gender-bending stage actress who must deal with losing her voice, Eliot turned to the historical resonance of the epic to adapt the closet drama in writing *The Spanish Gypsy*.

To develop this argument, I will first discuss *The Spanish Gypsy* in the context of Eliot's career at the time. In doing so, I will reveal her awareness of the rhetorical effects of different genres, as well as the ways in which the collision of epic and closet drama conventions caused a problem for some literary critics, those who could not accept works that ignored or tampered with prescriptive notions of genre. Then, I will demonstrate how characteristics of the epic and closet drama work with certain elements of *The Spanish Gypsy* to create a unique form that develops new possibilities for its female protagonist, possibilities which can only come from, and exist in, this hybrid.

"In the Most Irregular Fashion": The Epic Hybridization of the Closet Drama

In December 1863, Eliot attended a play, *Leah the Forsaken*, with her partner George Lewes (Haight, *Biography* 374). Lewes was inspired by the unrequited love story between a young Jewish girl and a Christian farmer set in seventeenth century Germany and felt compelled to write a similarly-themed play for their actress-friend Helen Faucit (Haight, *Biography* 374). He outlines the five-act plot, but urges Eliot to flesh out the drama itself (Haight, *Biography* 374). Eliot agreed, but the project was eventually neglected; however, the bare essence of the story and Eliot's desire to write a drama remained (Haight, *Biography* 375; Karl 379). Yet, Eliot felt compelled to change the subject matter; she writes in her "Notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*:

> nothing would serve me except that moment in Spanish history when the struggle with the Moors was attaining its climax, and when there was the gypsy race present under such conditions as would enable me to get my heroine and the hereditary claim on her among the gypsies. (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 376)

On September 6, 1864, Eliot notes in her journal that she has begun the "First Act of [her] drama" (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 165). By early November, she is well into the second act, and by the new year, she has completed the third (Haight, *Letters* 167). When she becomes ill in February 1865, on the strong advice of Lewes Eliot sets aside the drama, now four acts, and does

not return to it until August 1866 (Haight, *Letters* 303). At this point, Eliot still considers the work a drama, "precisely because it was in that stage of creation, or *werden*, in which the idea of the characters predominates over the incarnation" (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 303; in Cross 332). But Eliot is dubious about the dramatic form and writes that "the whole requires recasting" and that she "intends to give *The Spanish Gypsy* a new form" (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 303; in Cross 333, 334). A year later, Eliot classifies the work as a poem that began as a drama, yet the structural shadow of its original form remains in palimpsest. However, in a letter to John Blackwood dated December 30, 1867, Eliot says that "[Lewes] is especially pleased with the sense of variety [*The Spanish Gypsy*] gives; and this testimony is worth the more, because he urged me to put the poem by on the ground of monotony" (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 412; in Cross 360).

This "sense of variety" describes the way *The Spanish Gypsy* is represented and categorized in years to come, situated in the variable gap between poetry and drama by literary critics and scholars alike. For example, though her article is included in an issue of *Victorian Poetry*, Susan Brown classifies *The Spanish Gypsy* as a closet drama and defines closet drama as a performance that will occur within a reader's mind as he or she sits inside "'closets' or private rooms" (Brown 89, 91), while Sylvia Kasey Marks describes *The Spanish Gypsy* as a "long dramatic poem" (Marks 184). Despite this obvious slippage in classifying the work's genre and Eliot's pointed essays on form, scholars have focused their studies of *The Spanish Gypsy* on Fedalma's

characterization, the theme of social duty and personal desire, the connection between the Gypsy people and English identity/nationalism, Eliot's technique of narrative sympathy, and the relationship between *The Spanish Gypsy* and Eliot's novels.[3] None have fully examined the link between the work's genre blend, unusual form, and character development of its female protagonist.[4]

While scholars do find *The Spanish Gypsy* of interest with regard to Eliot and her novelistic career, astonishingly many still consider the work aesthetically inferior to Eliot's other books and tend to echo K.M. Newton, who

[3]Ian Hancock in *We are the Romani People*, Lou Charnon-Deutsch in *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession*, and Deborah Epstein Nord in *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807–1930* provide comprehensive discussions on the histories of the gypsy race. Both Charnon-Deutsch and Nord cover the "mystery of their origin" (Nord 7) and mark the commonly held belief that their race originated in Egypt, which notes the derivation of the name "gypsy" from "Egyptian" (Nord 7, Charnon-Deutsch 5). "Romany," or "Romani" is the name currently preferred in contemporary classification (Nord 18, Hancock xvii).

[4]The scholarship on *The Spanish Gypsy* includes: 1) Lou Charnon-Deutsch's *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession*, a study of the "idealized and sometimes demonized figure of the Spanish Gypsy" over centuries, which contains a section on Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* (4); Charnon-Deutsch focuses on the way nineteenth-century social scientists across Europe influenced public perception of the Spanish Gypsies and looks at how the rhetoric of race plays out in the drama, discussing how it affects duty, freedom, nationhood, and even science(114–124); 2) Bernard Semmel's "George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance," a study of Eliot's drama as reflective of social conservatism and positivism; 3) Michael Ragussis's *Figures of Conversion: The Jewish Question and English National Identity*, a turn toward the Jewish perspective in the drama (per a minor character, Sephardo), though he does consider *The Spanish Gypsy* a "portrait of the heroism of the female heart; the entire project of *The Spanish Gypsy* was framed from the beginning by an attempt to understand in what ways the genre of tragedy could function as category of the feminine — that is, as a representation of a specifically female action" (152); however, he neglects to fully explore the ways and leans into a discussion on race; 4)Deborah Epstein Nord's focus on the gypsy as a symbol of "unconventional [. . .] femininity" in "'Marks of Race': Gypsy Figures and Eccentric Femininity in nineteenth-century Women's Writing"; and 5) James Krasner's look at the "tension between fame and artistry" for Fedalma and for Eliot herself in "'Where No Man Praised': The Retreat from Fame in George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*."

makes the distinction that while *The Spanish Gypsy* reveals a side of Eliot's canon that opens up a new realm of Eliot study, "no one would make great claims for the poem as a work of art" (390) or Deborah Epstein Nord, who considers *The Spanish Gypsy* a "rehearsal for the novel Daniel Deronda" (Nord 100). However, *The Spanish Gypsy*, as a hybrid of the closet drama and the epic, allowed Eliot to create a space where the fate of her female protagonist is eternal, generative, and hopeful, even positively affected by the sorrows of personal sacrifice. Unlike Eliot's other female protagonists, Fedalma is recognized, even mythologized, for her self-sacrifice and is cast as a heroine, essentially a "Moses destined to deliver [her people] from bondage into freedom in a new land" (Nord 109). *The Spanish Gypsy* elevates Fedalma's quest for identity and agency (an internal conflict) to the heroic, making her story worthy of legend and legacy. In comparison, Eliot's *Armgart*, while also focusing on a women's struggle to define herself and her role in society, is not epic in scope.[5] *Armgart* tells the contemporary story of an opera singer who loses her voice to illness and worries about how that loss will affect her present and future, lamenting that she has been cast to "The Woman's Lot: A Tale of Everyday" (*Armgart* V, 129). Katherine Newey argues that *Armgart* "liberated Eliot" as a work in which the future of the female protagonist offers more than death — Armgart becomes a singing teacher — while *The Spanish Gypsy* "weigh[ed Eliot] down" in that regard (114–115). Though many biographical details

[5]Eliot's *The Legend of Jubal* (1870), though possessing themes of minstrelsy, identity, and community which reflect *The Spanish Gypsy* and epic in nature, is a long narrative poem, not a drama.

about Eliot could support Newey's claim, I disagree; the form of *The Spanish Gypsy*, just as the form of *Armgart*, plays an essential part in developing the narrative and rhetoric it is trying to convey.[6] A close examination of *The Spanish Gypsy* shows that, while the epic and the closet drama lost Victorian readership to the popularity of the novel, Eliot's combination of these démodé, yet classic genres into one work makes a creative and social statement about how the formal revision of genres extant and emerging in the mid-nineteenth-century speaks to the revision of roles and prescriptions given to Victorian women, in and out of literature.

Eliot displayed her enthusiasm for inventive approaches to writing in "Leaves from a Notebook." She wrote that an author had the responsibility to bring a new perspective to old ideas and ordinary concepts and argues, "Why should a story not be told in the most irregular fashion that an author's idiosyncrasy may prompt, provided that he gives us what we can enjoy? ... The dear public would do well to reflect that they are often bored from the want of flexibility in their own minds"(qtd. in Pinney 446). In giving her readers *The*

[6]Eliot experienced massive anxiety and depression while writing *The Spanish Gypsy*. Frederick Karl in *George Eliot: Voice of a Century*, his biography of Eliot, claims that at the time of her writing "[h]er talk is all of malaise and feebleness — clearly psychological and emotional" (384). Between 1863–65, she "hit bottom," Karl writes, and "after considerable writhing, she reached more deeply into herself than ever before; from that, she could exorcise the subjective parts of herself and let a more objective, broader element emerge" (386). Karl also says the drama evoked personal feelings for her about her father, whom Eliot idealized as a young girl and on whom he solely depended later in life. As an old man, he was very set in his ways and in his politics "protected the past as something sacred, his role in it as priestly" (43). Additionally, her anxiety could have been related to financial strain — this period marked a dry spell in her writing and income — or various ailments (419).

Spanish Gypsy, Eliot challenged the "flexibility" of her readership by telling the story in an "irregular fashion," perhaps in hopes that her "idiosyncrasy" would inspire them to think about what the innovations signified or suggested to the story. The year *The Spanish Gypsy* was published, Eliot also wrote in another personal notebook that

> it must be more fruitful to ask, what relations of things can be properly included under the word Form as applied to artistic composition, than to decide without any such previous inquiry that a particular work is wanting in form, or to take it for granted that the works of any one period or people are the examples of all that is admissible in artistic form. (qtd. in Pinney 432)

Eliot obviously saw, with regard to "Form," the value in slipping outside the "admissible," in originality, in creativity, in "relations of things." Yet after the incredible success of the series "Scenes of a Clerical Life" (1858) and the novels *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1863), and *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), Eliot was aware that her faithful readership might not like a "work wanting in form," or an "idiosyncratic" and "irregular" poetic turn inward and toward the past.[7] Eliot began to warn her

[7]In writing *Romola*, a historical romance set in fifteenth-century Florence, Eliot was worried about the public's reception. Eliot wrote in a letter to John Blackwood, "You know very well enough the received phrases with which a writer is greeted when he does something else than what was expected of him" (qtd. in Cross 208). But *Romola*, like her other novels, did strive for realism unlike *The Spanish Gypsy*; in a letter to R.H. Hutton, she suggests that "the details of Florentine life and history" hold the same weight as "the details of English village life"(qtd. in Cross 276).

publisher, John Blackwood, long before the work was sent out into the world; on a letter dated March 21, 1867, she writes, "The work connected with Spain is not a romance. It is — prepare your fortitude — it is — a poem" (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 354-355; in Cross 348). She goes on to say that she is not "hopeful" about the new work, despite being "quite sure the subject is fine"(qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 354-355; in Cross 348). In later correspondence, Blackwood encourages Eliot about the work, but Eliot remains cautious. On December 7, 1867, she replies, "What you say about 'Fedalma' is very cheering. But I am chiefly anxious about the road still untravelled — the road I have still *zurück zu legen* [to cover]"(qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 404; in Cross 357). After publication of *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot's public continues to worry her, as noted in May 1868, when she writes to her friend Caroline Bray,

> I expect a good deal of disgust to be felt towards me in many quarters for doing what was not looked for from me, and becoming unreadable to many who have hitherto found me readable and debateable. Religion and novels every ignorant person feels competent to give an opinion about, but en fait de poesie, a large number of them 'only read Shakespeare.'(qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 438; in Cross 15)

Obviously, Eliot anticipated *The Spanish Gypsy* to be poorly received, as readers who expected the "readable" style of novels would greet the drama with "a good deal of disgust."

But despite her anxieties, Eliot was compelled to frame the story in this unfashionable way, as she notes in a letter to Blackwood at the end of March 1868 when she says *The Spanish Gypsy* "is a little in the fashion of the elder dramatists, with whom I have perhaps more cousinship than with recent poets" (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 428; in Cross 4). As the "fashion" of those "elder dramatists," Eliot was inspired by history: a small Titian painting of the Annunciation that she had spied on her second visit to the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice inspired new ideas. As she scribbled in her notes on the work, she wrote, "It occurred to me that here was a great dramatic motive of the same class as those used by the Greek dramatists, yet specifically differing from them" (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 376; in Cross 9). In the painting, Eliot sees the story of a young woman torn between marriage and a more profound destiny — one "entailing a terribly different experience from that of ordinary womanhood" (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 376; in Cross 9) — as a universal tragedy weighing individual desires against the actions which would support the greater good, or community. However, she does not simply contain this narrative in the classic tragedy, or even a novel, with a female protagonist whose downfall leads to resignation of domestic duty or death, as exemplified by Romola or *The Mill on the Floss*'s Maggie Tulliver. Instead, Eliot turns these tragic elements into a dramatic, epic conflict that does not doom her female protagonist to a bleak, bound, definitive end.

At the time of *The Spanish Gypsy*'s initial inception, Eliot was not new to the epic and, in a letter to M. D'Albert-Durade in 1860, considered

her novels to possess "epic breadth" and also an "epic tediousness," a possible reference to her wide scope of characterization, theme, and setting (qtd. in Haight, *Letters* 361; in Cross 215). The epic, a long narrative poem with a setting which unfolds on a grand and vivid scale, originated as an oral genre, a tale told and shared by a community. By that year, Eliot had published two novels, *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), both of which focus on relationships in provincial English communities as well as on the theme of individual desire versus a moral and social duty that seems preordained. These "home epics" represent Eliot's signature style, one which translates the elevated settings, deeds, action, and consequence characteristic of the epic into those relative to the domestic sphere and the ordinary person. Book One of *The Mill on the Floss* begins with a narrator who dreams s/he is standing on a bridge overlooking the idyllic river Floss, and as an epic poet might, expresses his or her intention to tell the reader a tale about a day long gone by but still resonant in the present, a tale that starts with an ordinary Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver who "sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour" (13). In *Adam Bede*, the narrator compares himself or herself to an Egyptian sorcerer who uses a single drop of ink to reveal the "far-reaching visions" of the past and takes the reader, not to an epic battle or conflict, but to the village workshop of carpenter Jonathan Burge. In these two novels, and in the two to follow before publication of *The Spanish Gypsy* — *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Felix Holt* (1866) — Eliot establishes her narrator as a conduit of memory, a physical way to bring past into present, possibly to shape the future. As told by

the narrator, and by Eliot herself, these home epics were a record of localized, domestic traditions, experiences, and history.

But with *Romola*, first published serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* between July 1862 and August 1863, Eliot veered from the recognizable settings, characterizations, and conflicts to a novel influenced by both the epic and historical romance. Set in the midst of fifteenth-century Florence when the Medici were ousted by King Charles VIII of France and Dominican priest Girolamo Savonarola swept through the city with his religious reforms, the novel garnered mixed reactions. In 1863, Robert Browning couldn't immediately find a copy of *Romola* because Eliot's fans were so anxious to read the work they snatched every copy they could (Sanders 7). But although sales of *Romola* were high, Eliot drew disappointment from her readership in veering from her conversational tone and contemporary setting, as she imagined she would. Though many critics still regarded Eliot as a skillful and deft writer, they also felt that "[s]ometimes the antiquarian quite drowns the novelist" (*Saturday Review* 21) and that "[t]he historical background . . . somewhat oppresses the human interest of the tale, and in its ultimate impression affects us like a mediaeval painted window, in which the action has to be disentangled from the blaze of color and overwhelming accessories" (*Westminster Review* 28). Even for a historical novel with elements of romance and melodrama, readers found the tone of *Romola* "artificial and somewhat over self-conscious," even "pompous in its self-consciously epic assertiveness" (Sanders 10, 16). Eliot's readers, though loyal in their purchase, missed the "folksy" novel world she

usually delivered.

However, the "self-conscious" qualities and "assertive" risks of *Romola* apparently made appropriate scaffolding for *The Spanish Gypsy*, whose "pompous" larger-than-life themes, plot, and characters seemingly required a true epic frame. Told by a narrator whose identity is not blatantly revealed, *The Spanish Gypsy*'s narrative develops against the lush and detailed fifteenth century backdrop of the Christian-Muslim battle over Spain and the eradication of both the Jews and the Gypsies and focuses on two protagonists, Duke Silva, a "goodly knight, [a] noble caballero" (I, 207–08), and Fedalma, a virginal orphan raised by Silva's mother after being stolen during a raid on a Gypsy camp.[8] Fedalma is believed by some characters (represented by the Roman Catholic Prior) to be too far below Silva's station; nevertheless she and Silva fall in love. As the drama progresses, Fedalma discovers she is actually the daughter of Zarca, king of a band of Gypsies captured by Silva, and must ultimately choose between her desire for Silva and her duty to her new-found heritage. Though both Silva and Fedalma are the protagonists of the work, Fedalma ultimately becomes the "heroic figure" who will attempt to lead an entire nation, and race, into the future. She is, after all, *The Spanish*

[8]The drama also frames the nineteenth-century debate about Jewish conversion and its relationship to English nationalism, "The Jewish Question," but I will not explore that issue here. In the fifteenth century, as expressed in the play, the Zincali, or Gypsies, were seen by Western European culture as cunning and unworthy and only fit for imprisonment, after which they could be forced into labor or war. During this period, this particular band of Gypsies made their way into Spain, coming over the Pyrenees from Egypt. The Spaniards viewed the Zincali as wild, unruly thieves. As Fedalma says, "[A] race more outcast and despised than Moor or Jew" (2884–85).

Gypsy, while Silva, in the end, goes off to find personal redemption.

The Spanish Gypsy adheres to many epic conventions, from its myth-worthy protagonist and long narrative to its rich descriptive setting. But the work strays from epic formality in its overall composition. Regarding the construction of the epic, Bakhtin sees the genre as having a "past [that] is distanced, finished, and closed like a circle" (79). He suggests that only "low genres" like the novel are "flowing and transitory" and represent a "life without beginning or end" (80), while "all high genres of the classical era . . . are structured in the zone of the distanced image, a zone outside any possible contact with the present in all its openendedness" (79). Bakhtin views the epic as a story whose time has come and gone, whose action is not alive (69–70), while the novel remains in process, "a new world still in the making" (73). He also submits three distinguishing marks for a novel: a style which reflects a world whose cultures and languages are merging and exchanging; an inherent instability in its constant activity and development; and a collapse of time, which causes past, present, and future to overlap and dissolve (76–80). Interestingly, I find Eliot accomplishing in her work the opposite of what Bakhtin theorizes.

In her novels, Eliot employs a conclusion, epilogue, or finale to mark a definite end to the story she wants to tell; in doing so, she takes the opportunity to tidy up the characters' various trials and tribulations, and while these final sections frequently allude to the characters continuing to live their lives long after the book is closed, the very fact that Eliot caps off her novels provides

closure to the story and implies a distinct end to the narrative. For example, a "Conclusion" wraps up *The Mill on the Floss*, sending the reader five years into the future after the tragic flood in which Maggie drowns. Nature, after the destructive flood, has "repair[ed] her ravages" and restored life around the river Floss, but assures the reader that scars have been left behind, most notably on a tomb etched with the names of Tom and Maggie Tulliver and a dedication: "In their death, they were not divided" (547). In contrast, Eliot concludes *The Spanish Gypsy* with the everlasting image of Fedalma and Silva standing apart, the "waters widen[ing] slowly" (V, 436) between them and a "blackness overhung by stars" (V, 438). The story is left unfinished, implying that its characters are still acting, living; their lives have no "beginning or end."

Eliot evokes this feeling of timelessness throughout *The Spanish Gypsy*. As an epigraph to *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot remarked that she paid homage to the Spanish ballad, a genre which is often classified as a descendant of the epic, through her "trochaic measure and assonance"; however, Eliot also employed another unique characteristic of the Spanish ballad: its unusual approach to time.[9] Time is transitory within *The Spanish Gypsy* as the verb form changes from present to past tense (and vice versa). From one moment to the next, the narrator exchanges present for past; one instance of this unexpected change in grammar occurs in the scene just before Fedalma's dance in the Plaça Santiago,

[9] *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature*. eds. Mary Ellen Brown and Bruce A. Rosenberg.

when Roldan the entertainer and his son Pablo are performing for a crowd, Roldan with magic tricks and Pablo with his instrumental and vocal skills. The narrator describes how Pablo "pours [his] wondrous voice . . . /With wounding rapture in it, like love's arrows" (I, 1271, 1273) and how from him "[f]all words of sadness, simple, lyrical" (I,1276). Pablo then pours out the lyrics of his song in real time, present time, but when he takes a temporary breather and the text returns to narrative, the narrator returns to the past:

> When the voice paused and left the viol's note
> To plead forsaken, 'twas as when a cloud
> Hiding the sun, makes all the leaves and flowers
> Shiver. But when with measured change the strings
> Had taught regret new longing, clear again,
> Welcome as hope recovered, flowed the voice. (I, 1297–1302)

It could be that the narrator is indeed telling a story of a "finished" past here, but after Pablo sings one more song, the narrator arrives back on the scene with the following present tense narrative:

> The long notes linger on the trembling air,
> With subtle penetration enter all
> The myriad corridors of the passionate soul,
> Message-like spread, and answering action rouse
> Not angular jigs that warm the chilly limbs
> In hoary northern mists, but action curved
> To soft andante strains pitched plaintively. (I, 1315–1321)

This song can "with subtle penetration enter all/the myriad corridors" of the reader's "passionate soul." These "long notes" did not "linger" from some time long past, but are lingering now, "spread[ing]" and "rous[ing]" the soul to action. The story, in this way, becomes unfinished, boundless.

Eliot's temporal revision of the epic, a genre of action, experience, courage, and conquest, makes for an interesting rhetorical marriage to the closet drama. In the mid-nineteenth-century, closet drama was revered only as an exclusive literary genre. As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, the closet drama, by this time heavy with Romantic contemplation and philosophizing, could not be translated into theatrical production and subsequently left the footlights; with the popularity of melodrama, music halls, and plays about contemporary social issues, drama based on character development alone went straight to the page as audiences wanted action (Otten 4). But though closet drama was still considered a high form of literature, the genre did not have the plot or the realism audiences wanted. By the 1860s, the closet drama was essentially an unstaged monodrama, a space of authorial contemplation where the reader became spectator to a character's psychological conflict. As I mentioned in my introduction, Robert Browning described the genre in the dedication to *Stafford* (1837) as "Action in character": the "action" of the text comes from internal rather than external conflict. Though its strong lines of internal exploration could classify *The Spanish Gypsy* as what Byron considered "mental theatre," or drama which "fu[ses] the objective portrayal of action with the subjective lyrical voice" (Richard-

son 1), the composition of a traditional mid-nineteenth-century closet drama typically does not include much narrative, if any, and alternates sections of dialogue with a few stage directions. In comparison, the construction of *The Spanish Gypsy*, an active blend of omniscient narrative, dialogue, song, and epic themes, seems to promote movement, opening the doors of the closet drama to explore more than just psychological conflict or an author's personal philosophies. Unfortunately, its patchwork form did not appeal to critics who appreciated the familiar realism usually found in Eliot's work.

Surprisingly, *The Spanish Gypsy* was well-received by Eliot's loyal readership and went through several printings. But, because of Eliot's successful reputation as a novelist, most literary critics of the time immediately pitted *The Spanish Gypsy* against her previous works, as the anonymous "J.M." admits in the 1868 May/October issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*: "We cannot help measuring performance in the new medium by standards and ideas moulded from the study of achievements in the old; and George Eliot has such unrivalled mastery in prose that to equal herself she must be nothing short of transcendent in verse" (281). The critic goes on to say that "it is some disappointment at first to find that the new form has not quickened the beat, nor much heightened the pitch, nor given anything new of sweep and fire and intensity" (281). Henry James, in his review mentioned at the start of this chapter, also sets up the conflict between Eliot the verse dramatist and Eliot the novelist by suggesting that her "reputation was essentially prose-built, and in the attempt to insert a figment of verse of the magnitude of *The Spanish*

Gypsy, it was quite possible that she might injure its fair proportions" (621). The reputation of Eliot, as a prose "writer of recognized worth and distinction" (*Edinburgh Review* 524), obviously played a major part in the lukewarm response to, and perception of, *The Spanish Gypsy*.

Critics still applauded Eliot's skill with detail, but they did not accept her approach to the dramatic genre. James joins this school of thought when he says:

> Those who prize most her descriptive powers will see them wondrously well embodied in these pages. As for those who have felt compelled to declare that she possesses the Shakespearian touch, they must consent, with what grace they may, to be disappointed. . . . A real dramatist, I imagine, could never have reconciled himself to the odd mixture of the narrative and dramatic forms by which the present work is distinguished; and that George Eliot's genius should have needed to work under these conditions seems to me strong evidence of the partial and incomplete character of her dramatic instincts. (624)

Both "J.M." and James "prize" the "descriptive powers" and other skills that forge Eliot's talent as a novelist, but eschew as faulty and only "partially" dramatic "the odd mixture of narrative and dramatic forms" which make up *The Spanish Gypsy*. James even discredits Eliot's "genius" because of *The Spanish Gypsy*'s nonconformity, suggesting she is not a "real dramatist." "J.M." also claims that *The Spanish Gypsy* will be appreciated not "for its general

structure but on the strength of select passages" (287) and notes that the "intermixture of form" displays "an absolute insensibility to the elementary rights of form and to all artistic fitness of things"(281). An anonymous reviewer for the *Edinburgh Review* from October 1868 also criticizes the "peculiar" form of *The Spanish Gypsy* and considers it built by some "arbitrary method arising from some accident or convenience in the author's plan" (524). This reviewer goes on to censure Eliot for "some injury to that sense of artistic completeness which suspends critical judgment of the cultivated reader" (*Edinburgh Review* 524). Perhaps this mode of thinking explains why *The Spanish Gypsy* was so well-received upon publication, but has not been commonly studied as one of Eliot's major works; her name drew her fans, but the "peculiar" form left her critics believing "it might . . . have been told as well in prose" (*Edinburgh Review* 525).

The Spanish Gypsy's "Horizons of Expectation"

Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov argues in "The Origins of Genres" that "[i]t is because genres exist as an institution that they function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors" (qtd in Duff 199). A genre then brings with it certain "horizons of expectation," associations, inferences, and/or allusions, and as such, affects the way a narrative and its characters will be created and read. To illustrate the point using one of Eliot's more familiar works, *The Mill on the Floss*: if that novel were revised into a dramatic monologue, the essence of Maggie Tulliver's story, her familial relationships, and her "contented renunciation" (*Mill* 390) might be

well captured, but the whole of Maggie's identity, as fleshed out through its development as a character inside a Victorian novel having the room for the expansive details of realism, would certainly change.

The year *The Mill on the Floss* was published, an anonymous writer in *Macmillan's Magazine* defined the "modern novel" as "one of the most important moral agents of the community" (442) and located fiction "at the core of all the truths of this world"; specifically, a mid-nineteenth-century novel had to "observe and reason, and guide moral passions" (*Macmillan's* 446).[10] In thinking about Todorov's "horizons of expectations" with regard to a mid-nineteenth-century novel, the novel's narrative was to be evaluated in terms of its ability of observation and "reason," while certain aspects of Maggie's life in particular — her actions, inaction, thoughts, emotions, and above all her "moral passions" — were to be measured with a public yardstick. Located in a Victorian novel, Maggie's fictional life is positioned "at the core of all the truths," an example from which to learn. Maggie then becomes a symbol of what a young middle-class woman should or should not do, should think or not think.

In contrast, the Maggie Tulliver of a dramatic monologue, a genre in which the speaker of the poem interacts with herself or a silent listener, would be cast into a new role because the horizon of expectation, the rhetorical intention, would change. Like Todorov, John Stuart Mill noted a difference

[10]This article, "To Novelists — and a Novelist," addresses both the responsibilities and influence of novelists at large, acknowledging George Eliot with praise.

in the rhetoric of different genres, namely poetry and fiction; in his essay "What is Poetry?"(1833), he suggested that poetry was a "representation of feeling" (qtd. in Collins 1213), and while "[t]he truth of poetry [was] to paint the human soul truly, the truth of fiction [was] to give a true picture of life" (qtd. in Collins 1214). In other words, Mill believed that a poem exposed an individual's authentic being as captured in a given moment, while a novel focused on an individual's engagement with, and influence on, the larger world around him: "life." If we take poetry to mean, then, as Mill suggested, "feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude" (qtd. in Collins 1214), the dramatic monologue version of *The Mill on the Floss* could be pared down to Maggie's personal actions, reactions, and reflections (as told to an auditor or an implied auditor), without the judgment or guidance of a narrator's free indirect speech, without the outside commentary on how Maggie (and the other characters who inhabit her world) lives within, and affects, the community. Or, the story could be told by someone else in the town of St. Ogg's, someone who could provide only sideline commentary, or no commentary at all, about Maggie's life. In either case, the work would become one-voiced and subjective, the sense of community sidelined as well. As F. George Steiner asserts in a 1955 Preface to *Middlemarch*, a "storyteller depends essentially on the nature of his material and on the associations it will evoke in the reader's imagination" (273). But the meaningful "horizons" of genre determine the "nature" of a storyteller's "material" and the "associations it will evoke" and, as such, dictate the narrative in its approach, point of view, and theme, which is what

Eliot seemed to realize when she wrote in her journal that to fully embrace the scope of Fedalma's tale, the genre and form, and in turn, the narrative, "the whole" of *The Spanish Gypsy* "requires recasting."

Obviously, Eliot suspected that using a unique form of the closet drama to tell *The Spanish Gypsy* would be more rhetorically effective than that of the novel. As Mathilde Blind writes in her biography of Eliot (1883), "The poetic mode of treatment corresponds to the exalted theme of the 'Spanish Gypsy,' a subject certainly more fitted for drama or romance rather than for the novel" (167). Indeed, in "Leaves from a Notebook," Eliot writes,

> How triumphant opinions originally spread — how institutions arose — what were the conditions of great inventions, discoveries, or theoretic conceptions — what circumstances affecting individual lots are attendant on the decay of long-established systems, — all these grand elements of history require the illumination of special imaginative treatment. (qtd. in Pinney 446)

The conventional closet drama, its action based on introspection or a fleshing out of personal philosophy, would not have quite possessed "the sense of variety" or the "special imaginative treatment" that Eliot ultimately sought for the "grand" elements of the historically-based *The Spanish Gypsy.* In addition, the conventional closet drama, with its lack of stage directions and its long ruminations, would not have been able to mimic an epic tone or put *The Spanish Gypsy* in the same active, storytelling context; in this epic-infused

fashion and form, Eliot takes "mental performance" and makes it a cultural statement. To return to one of the quotations I used to open this chapter, Eliot writes: "I want something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view, and something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction" (qtd. in Pinney 447). In wanting "something different from the schemed picturesqueness," the realism, of the "ordinary historical fiction" that she had already accomplished, Eliot decided the original "nature" of *The Spanish Gypsy* had to be retooled, even perhaps "distressed," to fully capture her rhetorical intention. Susan Stewart defines a "distressed genre" as a contemporary version of a once-oral tradition "antiqued" to appear as though it belongs to the past (6) and includes the epic in her study. A distressed genre takes on an "immortal form" (Stewart 12) in reclaiming history for the reader; time becomes blurred as memory becomes the now, yet obviously has already occurred and been recorded. In "distressing" the closet drama with epic qualities, Eliot "author[ed] a context as well as an artifact" (Stewart 6), or attached to the work a certain set of associations particular to the epic. In this way, Eliot made legendary the story of a young woman forced to choose between her desires and her destiny and thus provided the story with enough credence to make it an "authenticating document" (Stewart 12) of permanence and legacy.

But what makes the form of *The Spanish Gypsy* so complex derives from the work's narrator which, by "its" very identity, drives the story's theme, shapes the story's direction, dissolves stylistic and social boundaries, estab-

lishes a context of mythos as well as of community, and challenges gender roles and histories. Eliot does this by recalling the Romantic use of folklore and oral traditions and returning to the culture of the minstrel, an entertainer in the medieval period known for his "heroic or lyric poetry" (OED). Eliot's minstrel style hearkens back to the eighteenth-century style of Thomas Percy and Sir Walter Scott, as the narrator of *The Spanish Gypsy* falls into the category of what Andrew Taylor calls "pseudo-minstrelsy" (39); more than a wandering musician, storyteller, or poet, the medieval minstrel was a respected historian, "the chief guardian of the chivalric ethos" (Taylor 38), rather than the street corner juggler or musician. Like those in Eliot's novels, *The Spanish Gypsy*'s narrator is essentially an agent of nostalgia who takes the reader back to another time and place, a keeper and conductor of memory. However, unlike her the fictional narrators in her novels, the narrator of *The Spanish Gypsy* is not merely a third-person omniscient device which oversees, and at times shapes, interrupts, and comments on, the story from a distance. This narrator is involved in the development of the story, both in telling the tale and in existing on scene.

The narrator's true identity is unknown as Eliot blurs the line between three possible roles: omniscient storyteller, unnamed witness inside the tale itself, and a specific participant in the tale, most likely Juan the minstrel. In fact, the conflation of the narrator's roles immediately generates questions about identity, as well as about the construction and presentation of both history and memory, themes vital to establishing the cultural mythos of Fedalma.

First, the narrator could simply be the omniscient poet/storyteller/minstrel, providing for the reader a personal interpretation of "historical record" or passing along folklore. The narrator refers to one of the men, a tavern keeper, as "Mine Host" (I, 235). This reference could signify two things. One, "Mine" could merely be evidence of the narrator's awareness of social propriety: the narrator could be making a nod to polite custom and acknowledging the host of the tavern as the guests would have. Or, two, the possessive pronoun "Mine" could mean that the narrator is reporting an eye-witness account of his own experience as an observer within the tale. In this situation, the narrator has a choice of roles: in introducing the reader to five men "grouped in a white tavern" (I, 222) to "Mine Host," the narrator could either be part of the group, or merely a guest at the same tavern where the men are congregating. Simultaenously, the possessive pronoun "Mine" attached to the word "Host" could also mean that the narrator represents one of the four men being hosted: Blasco the silversmith, Juan the minstrel, Roldan the old jester, or Pablo, son of Roldan.

Although the narrator, with this line of logic, could be any person in this group, Juan, described as "a crystal mirror to the life all around" (I, 329) and "singing as a listener" (I, 334), poses the most obvious choice, since the narrator in telling the story can be described as possessing those qualities "himself". The narrator of this drama is, for the reader, a "crystal mirror to life all around" this fifteenth-century Spanish setting and "sing[s] as a listener" with the ability to hear and witness all. Stylistically, the narrator, like

Juan, "hardly take[s] note/Of difference betwixt his own [voice] and others" (I, 333) as "he" switches between "his" own narrative and the dramatic dialogue between other characters. Enamored with Fedalma, his former student of poetics, Juan believes Silva's "knightly love" (I, 744) for Fedalma is the stuff of a "poet's strain" (I, 754). As "the spare man with the lute/who makes you dizzy with his rapid tongue," (I, 288–89), Juan is

> a minstrel still, in times
> When minstrelsy was held a thing outworn.
> Spirits seemed buried and their epitaph
> Is writ in Latin by severest pens,
> Yet still they flit above the trodden grave
> And find new bodies, animating them
> In quaint and ghostly ways with antique souls. (I, 316–322)

A "new body animat[ed]" by the "antique souls," Juan bears the responsibility of recording and remitting the past. These same reasons could also apply to the possible omniscient distant storyteller or the unnamed witness. Either could be reciting Juan's original story, tapping into the notion of social continuity. Juan, during the time the narrator tells this story, may be the minstrel "buried," seeking a "new bod[y]" (the narrator) to "animat[e]" with his "antique sou[l]." By taking on the role of the narrator, Juan makes the narrator "a troubadour revived" and continues the social cycle. The reference to "Mine Host," then, becomes a mark of collective memory, part of Juan's

original story handed down through the years. The narrator, from this vantage point, "hardly take[s] note/Of difference betwixt his voice and others" because he is one in a line of communal creation. The fluidity of the narrator's identity, time, and location, not to mention rhetorical intention, prevents the story being told from adhering to one time, place, and genre expectation. The narrator's impermanence reflects the notion of myth and legend, stories which stretch and simultaneously smudge prescribed boundaries.

Another important aspect of the narrator's variable identity is gender; though minstrels, on the whole, were male, some like Eleanor of Aquitaine, influential duchess and queen consort in the twelfth-century, were known to be women. The identity of *The Spanish Gypsy*'s narrator is ambiguous, and as such, could be identified as female as easily as male. If we imagine the narrator as a woman, the telling of *The Spanish Gypsy* resonates that much more: a female minstrel, one of few, passing along an "authenticating document" or "artifact" about a woman whose destiny is to become a national and cultural leader gives new meaning to, in the patronizing tone of Romney Leigh to his cousin and love interest Aurora, "writ[ing] woman's verses and dream[ing] woman's dreams" (*Aurora Leigh* II, 831). For the narrator of *The Spanish Gypsy* (as for Aurora Leigh), the "woman's verses" become the makers and keepers of a female-centered history and the "woman's dreams" become the potential for a cultural and matriarchal space. Granted, Fedalma predicts she will not succeed in keeping the gypsies united and will instead foster a "saint tradition, flickering low/In dying memories" (V, 109–110), yet nevertheless

she is determined "[t]o guard her people and to be the strength/Of some rock-citadel" (V, 128–129).

Though Isobel Armstrong credits Eliot for penning the "first humanist epic by a woman" (370), she also believes Fedalma "fails as a prophet" (371) and is not allowed to be both woman and leader. I disagree to an extent. A potentially female minstrel, if we imagine her in the mindset of the bardic Aurora Leigh, would be fashioning a record of a woman who "nobly strive[d]" (*Aurora Leigh V*, 81) to achieve a future for her people. Failure could be merely recognized as the honorable battle scar of labor and productivity, an attempt at "aims sublime" (*Aurora Leigh V*, 71), as noted in the drama itself. Fedalma does ask Zarca:

> Will the women in our tribe
> Suffer as I do, in the years to come
> When you have made them great in Africa
> Redeemed from ignorant ills only to feel
> A conscious woe? Then — is it worth the pains? (I, 3299–3303)

But Zarca reassures her: even if they fail in their mission, they will "[f]eed the high tradition of the world,/And leave our spirit in our children's breasts" (I, 3317–18). Their spiritual and cultural nourishment will be their legacy. With a female narrator, *The Spanish Gypsy* becomes the text of two women trying to achieve something larger than themselves, acknowledging and acting despite the great possibility of failure.

"All Gathering Influences Culminate": Genre and Characterization

As earlier noted, the nineteenth-century closet drama was a genre of personal contemplation and intimate exchange, a drama to be played out on a domestic "stage," whether read individually or performed with a small group of friends or often, as in the case of Eliot, with her partner George Lewes. This genre is fitting for a character like Fedalma, who, at the start of *The Spanish Gypsy*, worries over about her upcoming role as the future angel of Don Silva's house.[11] Though they are not yet married, Fedalma already anticipates how her life will change as his wife, her desires converging on and confined to the domestic stage. Seeking to experience a bit of the world before she becomes wed to the responsibilities of a Duchess, Fedalma sneaks into town and dances in the Plaça Santiago, where the reader first encounters her. Coaxed and impassioned by Juan's lute playing, the singing of the boy Pablo, and the "ardour of the crowd" (I,1451), she dances "glorified" (I,1360):

> All gathering influences culminate
> And urge Fedalma. Earth and heaven seem one,
> Life a glad trembling on the outer edge of unknown rapture. (I,1456–59)

In this scene, Fedalma becomes the point where "all gathering influences culminate": physical, metaphysical, public, private. She leads "the chorus of

[11]The angel in the house is an archetype popularized in the mid-nineteenth-century by Coventry Patmore's long narrative poem *The Angel in the House* (1854–1862). *The Angel in the House* provided a concrete image for middle-class domestic ideals: a virtuous, loving wife at the heart and soul of a virtuous, loving marriage.

the people's joy" (I,1360) and is both possessed and inspired by "the exultant throng" (I,1469). She simultaneously belongs and does not belong to them, performs for and performs with them. She does not remain in one place, but instead is "pushed, hustled . . . and thrust"(I, 1470) in and out of the crowd, according to her desires and theirs. Individual and community blur, exchange roles, and play multiple parts as Fedalma's private and public identities merge. She loses "[a]ll sense of separateness: Fedalma died/[a]s a star dies, and melts into the light./[She] was not, but joy was, and love and triumph" (I, 1983–1985). The closet drama genre becomes important to note here as Fedalma embraces public performance; she cannot dance this way within the walls and under the scrutiny of the Court. Eliot's choice and revision of closet drama works on many levels to bolster Fedalma's internal and external conflicts: as a genre inherently geared toward a smaller "public," where action happens within the mind or, if physically performed, within a contained community, the formal presence of the closet drama marks the contrast between what Fedalma wants and what is expected of her. She wants her life, her actions, to mean something in a larger space and community. As she explains to Silva afterward: "I longed to dance/Before the people — be as mounting flame/to all that burned within them" (I, 1974–76). Fedalma wants to be a conduit between the external and the internal, breaking down barriers and inspiring her audience to be and feel in the moment.

Silva is upset about her public display, dancing alone, virtually unchaperoned:

Silva: Dangerous rebel! If the world without
Were pure as that within . . . but 'tis a book
Wherein you only read the poesy
And miss all the wicked meanings. Hence the need
For trust — obedience — call it what you will —
Towards him whose life will be your guard — towards me
Who now am soon to be your husband.
Fedalma: Yes!
That very thing that when I am your wife
I shall be something different — shall be
I know not what, a Duchess with new thoughts[.] (I, 1990. . . 1993–2000)

As Silva's wife, Fedalma "shall be something different," certainly not the naïve "dangerous rebel" Silva currently chides. Not only will she have "new thoughts," trusting and obeying only him, her life's "guard," but more than likely as a Duchess, she will live her life inside the Court. After all, "a loving woman's world lies within the four walls of her home," as Eliot previously defines it in *Adam Bede* (99). Because she loves Silva, Fedalma accepts this future position, but goes on to tell him, "That very thing has made me more resolve/To have my will before I am your wife" (I, 2004–2005). Inspired by this "will," she ventured into the village because she wanted one last opportunity to "see the streets, the shops, the men at work,/The women, little children — everything" (I, 2018–2019). When Silva chastises her for "daring modesty" (I, 2031) and accuses her of "shrink[ing] no more/From gazing men than from

the gazing flowers" (I, 2031–2032), Fedalma says she only wants "the world to look at [her]/With eyes of love that make a second day" (I, 2034–2035). She sees no lust in the eyes of those around her, only love divine enough to control and create, or expand, time.

When their dialogue turns to their wedding, which Silva has arranged for dawn the next day, Fedalma expresses her joy over her experience in the village: "Now I am glad I saw the town to-day/Before I am a Duchess — glad I gave/This poor Fedalma all her wish" (I, 2127–2129). She laments that she will mourn for her days as "poor unwed Fedalma" (I, 2136), as "they are sweet,/And none will come just like them" (I, 2136–2137). Silva tries to assuage her grief by reassuring her that their marriage will be "the time of promise, shadows, and dreams" (I, 2152), then presents her with heirloom jewels as a pledge of his love. Yet when Fedalma tries on the rubies, she hears a noise which reminds her of the imprisoned gypsies she had seen in the Plaça. Sympathizing with their confinement, she confesses to her fiancé that she "long[s] sometimes to fly and be at large" (I, 2223) and feels "imprisoned by her luxury" (I, 2224). She tells him of dreams in which she "seem[s] to spring from the walls,/And fly far, far away, until at last/[she] find[s] [her]self alone among the rocks" (I, 2285–2287). She admits that she is afraid of her desire for freedom, and of how that desire might affect their love. She tries to contain her thoughts, those like a "torrent rushing through [her] soul" (I, 2300), but cannot.

After Silva leaves the room, she continues to meditate on her irrecon-

cilable longings, projecting her anxieties onto the rubies:

> These rubies greet me Duchess. How they glow!
> Perchance they loved once, were ambitious, proud;
> Or do they dream of wider life,
> Ache from intenseness, yearn to burst the wall
> Compact of crystal splendor, and to flood
> Some wider space with glory? Poor, poor gems!
> We must be patient in our prison-house,
> And find space in our loving. (I, 2368–2376)

Fedalma "dream[s] of wider life," "ache[s] from intenseness," and "yearn[s] to burst the wall." Barricaded in the "prison-house," she cannot "flood some wider space" with her zest for life and must find a way to be content and "patient" within the space she will be given. The development of this aspect of Fedalma's internal conflict speaks directly to the drama's hybrid form; as Fedalma is faced with becoming the angel imprisoned in Silva's house and longs to "burst the wall," the meeting of the closet drama, a genre based on private meditation and thought, and the epic, a genre structured on action and deeds, builds that emotional tension. Thus, when Fedalma discovers she is a Gypsy, this thematic, formal connection, this junction of private and public genres, becomes even more vital to the construction of story as Fedalma wonders what path to choose. Fedalma is caught at a crossroads between her love's "prison-house" and a "wider life," just as her story becomes a crossroads of genres.

This conflict of desires is often expressed through the bird imagery, which also speaks to the rhetorical intentions posed by the closet drama and epic. When Fedalma reminds Silva about the time she "uncaged the birds" (I, 1931) against his wishes because "something stronger/[f]orced [her] to let them out" (I, 1933–34), the birds not only represent her fear of confinement, but also allude ironically to the psychological exploration of self which typically forms the basis of the closet drama. In the genre, the focus is not on how a character's thoughts lead him or her to act, but the thoughts themselves. Although Fedalma's restless thoughts would provide a strong foundation for a story grown from self-analysis and contextualized in a genre built on the investigation of the restless psyche (a seemingly perfect fit), she is not freely permitted to "uncage" her thoughts, just as she cannot freely uncage the birds. In other words, Fedalma feels like she must explain herself, restrain herself. The birds, in this case, symbolize the imprisonment of Fedalma's thoughts and actions as a woman, and demonstrate how a woman had limitations set even on her private intimations.

In contrast, when Zarca finally confronts Fedalma about her true identity as a Gypsy princess, he tosses a dead bird through her window with a note attached written in blood: "Dear child, Fedalma,/Be brave, give no alarm — your Father comes!" (I, 2792–93). Zarca wants her "to fly" (I, 3109) with him and the Gypsies, rather than stay with Silva in the palace where her spirit will be grounded and will eventually die like the bird he tossed through her window. With Silva, she will be a "parrot, chained to a ring" (I, 3187), an ex-

otic bird domesticated and made a pet, while with Zarca, she will either be an "eagle" (I, 3186), a bird of freedom, strength, and independence, or a "crane with outspread wing" (III, 652). Zarca wishes for his daughter to soar beyond her "miserable, petty, low-roofed life" (III, 644), to "take wingèd pleasures, wingèd pains" (III, 662). These are not the pleasures and pains of someone destined to live the life of a "home epic," but of someone "born to reign" (I, 3164) in a true epic.

Fedalma's conflict between remaining with Silva and "flying" with her father also manifests itself in the cultural motif of the "Gypsy," which, like the bird imagery, provides another reason why the interplay between the epic and closet drama can be discussed as more than some "arbitrary method arising from some accident or convenience in the author's plan," as suggested by a reviewer at the *Edinburgh Review*(*Edinburgh Review* 524). In fact, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Eliot, in notes she made during her drafting of *The Spanish Gypsy*, purposefully chose to focus her narrative on what she termed the "gypsy race," particularly as it was positioned at the height of the Spanish conflict with the Moors and the Jews (Haight 376); historically speaking, at the end of the fifteenth century when the drama takes place, the Spaniards regarded Gypsies below Jews, who had enraged and alienated the Spaniards with their religious beliefs, financial prosperity, strong sense of community, and, for some, their seemingly false conversion to Christianity.[12] The

[12]On March 31, 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella announced an edict of expulsion, marking their "decision to banish all Jews of both sexes forever from the precincts of Our

Jews were expelled from Spain on order of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and those who were found by the Inquisition to be pretending Christian faith were burned alive. Eliot illustrates the treatment of the Gypsies and the Jews in a comment Blasco, a silversmith, makes to the rest of his friends at the inn after another man, Lopez, remarks that the Queen "would have the Gypsies banished with the Jews" (I, 959):

> Jews are not fit for heaven, but on earth
> They are most useful. 'Tis the same with mules,
> Horses, or oxen, or with any pig
> Except Saint Anthony's.[13] They are useful here
> (The Jews, I mean) though they may go to hell.
> And, look you, useful sins — why Providence
> Sends Jews to do 'em, saving Christian souls.
> The very Gypsies, curbed and harnessed well,
> Would make draught cattle, feed on vermin too,
> Cost less than grazing brutes and turn bad food
> To handsome carcasses; sweat at the forge
> For little wages, and well drilled and flogged
> Might work like slaves, some Spaniards looking on.(I, 970–982)

Blasco argues that although Jews commit the "useful sins" so "Christian souls"

realm." The Jews were commanded on pain of death to leave within four months. They could take personal belongings, but no gold, silver, coins or jewelry. See *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain* by Benzion Netanyahu (New York: Random House, 1995).

[13]This pig, according to the fable, helped St. Anthony bring fire from Hell to people on earth.

do not have to stoop to such work, Gypsies are valuable because they work more than the "grazing brutes," or Jews, "cost less," are able to survive on spoiled meat and "vermin" like vultures, and take orders and ample punishment like "slaves." Blasco goes on to say that God sent the Gypsies "wandering" to Spain to do the most menial jobs for the Spaniards and turning them away would be a sin. Eliot, in the early stages of plotting the drama, was familiar with the historical events and sociocultural prejudices of the time as interpreted by William Hickling Prescott in his historical narrative *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, The Catholic of Spain* (1861), since she was reading his book while writing the first act of *The Spanish Gypsy* (Karl 383). In Eliot's notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*, she remarks,

> I could not use the Jews or Moors, because the facts of their history were too conspicuously opposed to the working out of my catastrophe. Meanwhile the subject had become more and more pregnant to me. I saw it might be taken as a symbol of the part which is played in the general human lot by hereditary conditions in the largest sense, and of the fact that what we call duty is entirely made up of such conditions; for even in cases of just antagonism to the narrow view of hereditary claims, the whole background of the particular struggle is made up of our inherited nature. (qtd. in Cross 10)

For Eliot, her "subject," the Gypsies, symbolizes how "hereditary conditions in the largest sense" — physical characteristics, heritage, history — decides

the way in which one is treated in society, determines one's future or one's "general human lot," and plants in one a certain sense of "duty." All of this measures how much of a "particular struggle" they will have to endure in life. For Eliot, the "hereditary conditions" of the Jews and Moors were too known, too "conspicuously opposed" to the conditions of a subject that, for many early and mid-nineteenth-century writers like Sir Walter Scott with his Gypsy character Meg Merrilies in the novel *Guy Mannering*(1815) and George Borrow, whose first-hand experiences with the Gypsies as recorded in both *The Zincali: An Account of the Gypsies of Spain* (1841) and *Romany Rye* (1857), conjured images of boundlessness, freedom, and most importantly, the unknown (Nord 25, 71).[14]

Lou Charnon-Deutsch in *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession* states that the marginalization of the Roma/Romany as a people began with their identification as "Egyptians" (5) because, as he summarizes, myth claimed that the Egyptians

> had denied succor to the Holy Family as it fled Egypt and so were ousted to wander the world to atone for their refusal; they were the Egyptians of the Old Testament, who, Ezekiel prophesized, would be dispersed among the nations; they had denied their Christian faith and were being punished by forced pilgrimage for five years, or ten, or forever; they were a people forever cursed after they

[14]For an overview on this topic, see Deborah Nord's *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

> participated in the death of Christ by making the nails with which he was crucified. (5)

Their "hereditary condition," in Eliot's context the history commonly believed about the Gypsy heritage, had doomed the Gypsies to a rootless existence of "wander[ing] the world to atone" for their sins against God, the Holy Family, Christ. The Egyptians, or Gypsies as the name evolved, became people on the periphery," as Deborah Epstein Nord suggests in *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807–1930* (4). Nord posits that their positioning as exiles or outcasts within the bounds of mainstream society categorized the Gypsies as "stuck in representational limbo" (122) and marked them as displaced and disinherited. In literature of the nineteenth-century, the figure of the Gypsy often symbolized a quest for roots and belonging, the search for identity without having a distinctive history or geography to draw from (Nord 11, 122). In the shadow of their mythology, the Gypsies had no allegiance, no faith, no homeland to claim; as Zarca, the king of the Gypsies says himself in *The Spanish Gypsy*, his people "have no Whence or Whither in their souls,/No dimmest lore of glorious ancestors" (I, 2889–2890), "no great memories" (I, 2908). This lack of "lore" and "memories" marked a certain sense of cultural vacancy and inspired the idea that because the Gypsies did not have much to remember and/or contemplate, they hardly existed. This partial existence translated to the Gypsies being compared in *The Spanish Gypsy* to "draught cattle" (I, 978), further referencing the social shackles placed on their identity, self-expression, and even on their thoughts themselves. In Eliot's novels, the

Gypsy figure rarely has a voice and is hardly more than a thematic device, reflecting a "rhetoric of primitive desires" (Nord 3) on the part of writer, reader, and character. For example, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* sees an epic freedom and independence in "Gypsy" life, but that vision soon becomes an unrealistic dream that she is conditioned to resist and force herself not to think about. The contradictions of the "Gypsy" lifestyle — the freedom to wander, the non-existent past, the roguish physicality — were at once frightening and exotic to those of nineteenth-century mainstream society and signified an "Other" space, a possible place where one could escape from propriety and address one's darker side (Nord 6, 12, 24, 71).

Through the revising and joining of elements belonging to the epic and the nineteenth-century closet drama, Eliot exposes the existence of this "representational limbo," this Other space. In this hybrid genre, a fifteenth-century Gypsy — a woman — is trapped by nineteenth-century representations of cultural and gender identity and is offered the opportunity to break free. Eliot's implementation of the epic into the closet drama makes Fedalma's quest for representation seen, heard, acknowledged. As the epic allows the Gypsy people in the drama to inherit a new "lore" through an "authenticating document," to again reference Susan Stewart's definition of the epic, not to mention the telling (and retelling) of this tale, the closet drama gives a people once deemed unworthy to speak or think a forum in which to contemplate both a past and a future. It literally formalizes their quest for public recognition, to be more than "grazing brutes" on the edge of humanity. In this work, Fedalma

becomes the starting point for the Gypsies' history; she becomes the "glorious ancestor," the "lore." At the same time, *The Spanish Gypsy*, as a work whose title specifically locates place and culture, finally provided the Gypsies with a "Whence [and] Whither in their souls," making them no longer displaced or disinherited.

To "Wed a Crown": Revising a Woman's Lot

Isobel Armstrong argues that "[a]t the heart of [*The Spanish Gypsy*] is a question about the extent to which women are capable of producing a powerfully imaginative national myth about unity and cohesion, a matriarchal myth" (370). While Armstrong does not believe Eliot succeeds, I offer another opinion. Certainly, as I have noted in this chapter, the text indicates that the Gypsy nation may not stay together when Fedalma becomes leader after her father's death; although the Zincali (as the speakers are identified when they speak as a group) vow to "obey [their] Queen" (IV, 959) at Zarca's final breath, Fedamla imagines the end of her people as a nation. She envisions them turning away from her leadership to "fashion their own service," "to come when it should suit them"(V, 97–98). Because of their desire for independence, she sees them "break[ing] into small and scattered bands" that "would propogate forgetfulness" (V, 103, 105) of their nation. She predicts the "death of hopes/Darkening long generations" (V, 146–147) and views herself as "the funeral urn that bears/The ashes of a leader" (V, 289–290), even forecasts "[s]ome other hero with the will to save/The outcast Zincali" (V, 279). But as I have suggested, the unconventional form of this work demands

a new perspective of Fedalma and her fate. Like Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke, Fedalma bemoans forfeiting her love and anguishes over her duty to the Gypsies; however, *The Spanish Gypsy* is not one of Eliot's novels in which the female protagonist's "deeds do not have consequences that go very far beyond herself" (Berman 555–556), or in which the female protagonist herself is permanently "stuck in representational limbo," particularly as evidenced by the comparison of an ordinary "woman's lot" to an extraordinary, epic, woman's lot.

Zarca tells Fedalma that she "belong[s] not to the petty round of circumstance/That makes a woman's lot" (I, 3170–71), using the term to reference what he sees as just an ordinary marriage to Silva. To him, the ordinary "woman's dream" or "woman's lot" of love, romance, and desire equates to enslavement and cannot compare to being the "woman who would save her tribe" (I, 3011, 3033); this woman would have power beyond the domestic, beyond the "petty." In Zarca's mind, marriage to Silva, though founded on love, would limit his daughter's experiences and keep her in a role where social and religious authorities would denigrate her, while as a Gypsy queen, she would have authority over all. Fedalma ultimately sacrifices her love for Silva for public service, rather than sacrifices who she is for love. In fact, the act may even be more than duty or even "hereditary condition" on a subconscious level, as Fedalma always longed for the personal freedom to "fly far, far away" (I, 2286). Silva tells the Prior, "I seek to justify my public acts/And not my private joy" (1669–1670), and Fedalma takes that vow equally. To the con-

trary, Victor Neufeldt believes Fedalma makes a "useless sacrifice" motivated by others and describes her fate as "the nothingness of a future based on a denial of personal happiness" (52), a statement which echoes a metaphor Eliot uses in the short story, "Janet's Repentance," from *Scenes from a Clerical Life*: "the blank that lay for her outside the home" (*Scenes* 335). In "Janet's Repentance," Janet chooses to remain married to an abusive man rather than venture on her own into the "blank" or unknown. Janet obviously worries about the "nothingess," choosing to stay instead with the familiar, despite its dangers. In *The Spanish Gypsy*, Fedalma may forego her "personal happiness," but does so with courage and awareness; for her, "the blank" is frought with visions of risk and tragedy. Experiencing the loss of a father, lover, and a community can certainly be considered suffering, but not nothingness.

Instead "the blank" becomes the site for female potential beyond the norm, particularly for "some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen" (*Aurora Leigh V*, 196) whose historic tragedy the fictional Aurora Leigh (and literary critics) dismisses as the type of story too far in the past to be relevant to contemporary readers. But Fedalma is depicted as a self — and nation — divided, one side of her "representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited, often criminal self," a common motif in nineteenth-century literature (Rosenfeld 328). Claire Rosenfeld in "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double" states that the motif indicates "[t]he dream of reconciliation between conflicting selves" (328, 343), and *The Spanish Gypsy* entertains that

possibility for Fedalma. In her quest for identity, Fedalma chooses to be the "angel of the homeless tribe" (I, 2971), a moniker which not only identifies her with the Gypsy nation inside the text, but also connects her to a mid-nineteenth-century readership, a nation of women who, like her, strive and fail to fully become the angels of the house because of their own conflicting duties and selves.

As the name "angel of the homeless tribe" illustrates, Fedalma's "conflicting selves" do not perfectly reconcile: Fedalma must adhere to certain patriarchal ideals (since her choices are limited to duty to her father/patriarchal nation or duty as a wife), while surrrendering a personal ideal (her love for Silva). Additionally, although part of her meets the definition of Patmore's "angel," because of her "hereditary conditions" she cannot fully become an "angel in the house": Fedalma is as pure as a "rain-tear on a rose leaf" (I, 894), and Juan tells his friends at the start of the drama, "no highest born Castilian dame,/Betrothed to the highest noble, should be held/More sacred than Fedalma" (I, 747–749). But Fedalma is also "crowned with glossy blackness" (I, 884), her angelic halo taking on a darker hue and threatening the submissive, innocent, and angelic notion of woman. She is not a bride of Patmore's poem, but a "brid[e] of Satan in a robe of flames" (I, 1748). Yet at the same time, a space of "reconciliation" opens for Fedalma as her personal dream, "to be free" (I, 2295), comes true, a space of reconciliation in which Fedalma receives the chance to lead her own life and lead her people. Whether or not she fails is somewhat irrelevant.

Fedalma is not Maggie or Mary or Dorothea or even Romola; she is resigned to her duty, but she will "wed a crown" (I, 3357), and in her father's eyes, they "will make royal" (I, 3358) their "people's lowly lot" (I, 3358). Fedalma's royal crown could not be worn in the domestic reality of a conventional nineteenth-century novel, but in the unstaged epic verse drama, Fedalma finds a "sacred poet" (*Middlemarch* Prelude) to sing and record her experience with the power of oral tradition, communal memory, even the idea of a shared performance. She will not "s[i]nk unwept into oblivion" (*Middlemarch* Prelude). Yet there are those scholars who argue that because Fedalma does not die "mercifully" in the end, nor experience a grand epiphany, nor feel a great comfort, her life is bleak (Neufeldt 52). I have to question, bleak by what and whose definition? Since we are not privy to the alternative future of Fedalma, i.e. her future with Silva, can we call her actions "a useless sacrifice," especially since we only know idealistically what she sacrificed? If she had stayed with Silva, would her fate necessarily be less bleak? Or, is there a possibility she might have a different sort of self-sacrificial fate similar to Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Will Ladislaw or a darker fate similar to the drowning of Maggie Tulliver? *The Spanish Gypsy* not only gives us a new Eliot heroine whose story warrants further debate and analysis, but allows us to see Eliot as a writer taking risks outside her usual genre, acknowledging and acting despite the great possibility of failure, much like Fedalma.

Chapter 3

"Something of His Manhood Falls": Michael Field's *Stephania* as Critique of Victorian Male Aesthetics and Masculinity

> We are desperately alone in a world that shuns us. What can it be! *Stephania* cannot be responsible for it all. We are boycotted in the papers, by the men (Pater, Meredith, Hutton) to whom we have sent our book & by even literary society. It is mysterious. (Edith Cooper, from their journal, *Works and Days*, January 26, 1893)

> [E]ach time I heave/My bosom something of his manhood falls. (*Stephania*, II, 381-82)

Not long after the closet drama *Stephania* (1892) was published by Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper under the pseudonym "Michael Field," Cooper recorded her bewilderment and anxiety over the public reaction to the work in the personal journal she shared with Bradley called *Works and Days*. This was not the first time Cooper worried about criticism regarding their work. In the eight years since they had begun writing together as Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper often expressed, in their collaborative journal as

well as in their personal correspondence to each other, anxiety over their public reception and often discussed how contemporary audiences resisted their archaic language and Shakespearean bent.[1] In these instances, Bradley and Cooper would cheer each other, encouraging the other woman to persevere in her talent and ambition. In a letter to Cooper in 1885, early in their career as Field, Bradley refers to a less-than-stellar review in the *Pall Mall Gazette* that she had ripped into "small fragments" and advises her niece that their literary struggles are "common to all poets" and that they should "rejoice to share their bitter herbs of adversity" (Folio 117, MS. Eng. Lett.c.418). Bradley goes on in the same letter to remind Cooper that as Michael Field, "[W]e have determined by Heaven's grace to give the English people plays full of poetry & religion, & humour, & thought. They will not like this." I believe, however, that the unusually strong critical reaction to *Stephania*, labeled by Cooper in the quotation that begins this chapter as a boycott and a shunning, indicates something more than just the ordinary critical resistance from the press, which contemporary scholars and turn-of-the-century critics usually attribute to Bradley and Cooper's spinsterhood, their gender, their collaboration, and the genres in which they wrote.[2]

Stephania, set in the eleventh-century about a woman seeking revenge

[1] They would write together for nearly 32 years (1881-1913), and would publish 25 dramas and 11 books of poetry. Print runs remained small, for an elite audience.

[2] Contemporary scholars of Michael Field include Marion Thain, Ana Vadillo, Jill Ehnenn, Yopie Prins, and Holly Laird. In her unpublished biography of Michael Field written in the mid-1970s, Ursula Bridge recounts the opinions of many of Bradley and Cooper's peers on this subject (See Ms.Eng.misc.d.983, Michael Field archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford).

against a man for murdering her husband, had struck a very particular chord with a very specific readership, one that might not be as "mysterious," as Cooper indicated. Given that *Stephania* eschews Field's usual Elizabethan form and foregrounds what they called their "Eternal-No" period in which publishers hesitated to print their dramas (Donoghue 89), Cooper's diary entry at the start of this chapter suggests a possible new explanation. I want to argue that Field's *Stephania* is an allegorical narrative that uses the female invasion and conquest of an exclusive homosocial empire in eleventh-century Rome to blame what they saw as the nineteenth-century decay of Art on the homosexual desires of the male Decadent community.[3]

A few months before Cooper wrote about the boycott, she seemed to have an inkling of things to come; in a journal entry from September 18, 1892, the day she and Bradley took the manuscript to their publisher, Elkin Matthews, Cooper writes: "The man seems in a panic; he says nothing about the sale of the book, he never 'smiles' again. Does he fear, does he sicken over our morality? We make these sacrifices for art G.M. says women will not make."[4] Though Matthews, in a partnership with John Lane (a frequent editor

[3]This type of allegorical narrative participates in the tradition of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson, which J.A. Symonds references in a letter to Stevenson himself: "Viewed as an allegory, it touches upon one too closely" (Showalter 115; March 3 1886 - Letters of J.A. Symonds, ed. Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968] 120-121). Showalter says "men may have read [Jekyll and Hyde] as a signing to the male community" (115). Additionally, throughout this chapter, the term homosocial will reference Eve Sedgwick's definition within an "orbit of desire" (10), on a "continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (1).

[4]The drama was then named *Otho*. Also, "George" refers to good friend George Meredith. The quotation comes from Add Mss 46780, Folio 16, *Michael Field and Fin de Siecle*

of Field's work), was an avid publisher of work by Aesthetes and Decadents, including Arthur Symons, John Gray, and Oscar Wilde (Beckson xxxiv), he obviously does not react positively, in Cooper's eyes, to Field's drama; he does not engage Bradley and Cooper in the usual fashion, does not "smile" or speak about the work. Cooper undeniably has anxiety over whether Matthews "fear[s]" for or "sicken[s] over" their collective moral state. In December 1891, after Cooper and Bradley pitched *Stephania* to Matthews, Cooper does write in their journal that he "hesitates over *Stephania*" because "Michael Field" has waited so long after *The Tragic Mary* (1890) to produce another closet drama and suggests they concentrate on publishing lyrics since their readership is more receptive to that genre.[5] Bradley and Cooper give Matthews a collection of lyrics to be compiled in the poetic volume, *Sight and Song* (1892), but they continue to advocate for *Stephania*. Matthews finally relents but, based on his initial negative reaction to the receipt of the manuscript, is not enthusiastic about promoting the work. Though Matthews' response is open for interpretation, I want to show that the reception of *Stephania* is directly connected to the "sacrifices for art" Bradley and Cooper "make" which other "women will not." More specifically, I want to show how Bradley and Cooper, in trying to thematically reclaim Art — and agency for women artists — through the narrative and metanarrative of *Stephania*, offended their already small and

Culture and Society: The Journals, 1868-1914 and the Correspondence of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper from the British Library London, hereafter referred to as *Journals and Correspondence*.

[5]Folio 140 - from a note written by Katharine Bradley, November 29, 1890, *Journals and Correspondence*.

elite readership comprised mostly of male Decadents.

In the biography *We Are Michael Field*, Emma Donoghue claims Bradley and Cooper were fully aware of the bold statement they were making about the "corruption" of their time, particularly through the actions of their female protagonist, a former Empress turned "prostitute murderess" (76). Donoghue also notes that Cooper had acknowledged a connection between, in Cooper's words, the "'laxity — wealthy — degeneration," of "Imperial Rome" and the fin de siècle (76). Although Donoghue goes on to claim that *Stephania* was "partly a fantasy of revenge" against Bernhard Berenson, a man who emotionally invaded Bradley and Cooper's relationship, I want to shelve that particular biographical reading in this chapter and align with Cooper's analogy of Roman and Victorian society to devise a more complex, palimpsest-like style analysis of *Stephania*.[6]

The plot of the drama unfolds as follows: in 1002 A.D., former Empress Stephania, bent on revenge for her husband Crescentius's murder, plots to rid Rome of the new Emperor. She invades the usurper's male-only inner sanctum by assuming the guise of a courtesan and ultimately triumphs as a symbolic queen and emperor. For Emperor Otho and Gerbert, Stephania represents a sexual insurgence which has the power to destroy their physical and emotional

[6]Apparently Cooper developed feelings for Berenson, and he was the only person who came between Bradley and Cooper in a romantic sense. Donoghue remarks that Bradley appreciated the intellect of this "good-looking, Lithuanian-American art expert," but Cooper developed a full-on crush (70). I agree that *Stephania* provides ample evidence for that reading.

well-being, their relationship to each other and to God, and the spread of the Roman Empire. For the Decadent male artists and critics who viewed woman as a nemesis to creative production, social order, and personal salvation, the figure of Stephania, as created by two female members of their literary coterie, not only represented a personal betrayal in a time when the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law of 1885 made illegal all male homosexual acts, private or public, but also seemed to chime in with homophobic attacks on fin de siècle homosexual decadence, attacks that blamed the end of the British empire on the same depravity that, many believed, had brought down the Roman Empire. For Bradley and Cooper, the figure of Stephania, as she battled what they considered masculine "perversity," reclaimed for the woman artist a new authority based on an aesthetic vision of Beauty and Art that they saw becoming tainted by the male Decadents' focus on physical desires. For those male Decadents, *Stephania* seems to have put Michael Field finally and firmly on the wrong side of this artistic and political/sexual divide. While Bradley and Cooper felt writing the drama was the "Eve of their resurrection as artists," as Cooper declared in a journal entry prior to the drama's publication, ironically, the drama's critique of the exclusion of women from power, which Bradley and Cooper hoped would win them a place in the homosocial world of the Decadents, instead ended up permanently exiling them from that world.[7]

[7]The journal entry is dated Easter Thursday, 1891; Folio 27, *Journals and Correspondence.*

Elizabeth Primamore, in echo of other Field scholars, suggests that Bradley and Cooper used Michael Field as a means to "dialogue with an elite male homosexual world" (Primamore 100). A drama about a woman disguising herself to access male power, written by a pair of women claiming a male identity also to access male power, blatantly displayed women's growing social and literary cogency in the turn from the fin de siècle to Modernism and challenged the authority and agency of the very people who made up their primary — and elite — readership.

I want to specifically demonstrate here that, in writing *Stephania*, Bradley and Cooper adapted the closet drama, traditionally a male-identified genre with its narrative based on inward conflict rather than external conflict, in three important ways: 1) they used *Stephania* to repurpose the closet drama genre — and consequently the closet — as a place of physical action for women; 2) they present *Stephania* as a figure of strategy and agency by revising literary portrayals of her and by appropriating the Decadent trope of the courtesan; and 3) they reconfigured the power dynamic of the erotic triangle to depict Stephania's ultimate dominion (rather than subordination or death) by using a trialogue form to structure the drama. To make my argument in this chapter, I look back to a few key definitions of the "closet" offered in my introduction: the spatial sense of the closet as a "private room," "an inner chamber," or "the private apartment of a monarch or potentate" (OED) representing the source of authoritative power, and the metaphorical sense of the closet as a place either of "private or concealed trouble in one's house or

circumstances" or of the "secret, covert, especially with reference to homosexuality." I will also illustrate how the triangular relationship of Stephania, Emperor Otho, and Gerbert adds a new dynamic to the theory of triangular desire in Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men*.[8]

Before illustrating these points, I want to speak to the recent argument made by leading Field scholar Marion Thain. In *Michael Field: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin de Siècle*, Thain takes Bradley and Cooper from the margins of mainstream Aestheticism and makes the women central to the movement; she looks through a number of lenses, including the way in which "relationships with their male mentor figures" reveal the pair's active involvement with aesthetic principles and ideals (12). Like most Field scholars, Thain focuses on Field's poetry, rather than their diaries and/or dramas, and marks poetry as Michael Field's "major legacy for today's critic" (10). She credits one reason for this classification as "our lack of understanding of the closet drama genre" (10). Through my analysis of *Stephania*, I want to present Bradley and Cooper's revision of the closet drama as a direct commentary on Aestheticism's wayward relative, Decadence, and, along the way, I hope to improve "our lack of understanding" of the closet drama genre. Ultimately,

[8]This chapter undoubtedly draws provocative connections among the relationship of Bradley and Cooper, the closet drama genre, the "closets" of male and female homosexuality, and the trends of Aestheticism and Decadence at the fin de siècle. But I see the primary goal of my work here as offering the first critical inquiry of the intersection of genre and women's agency as shown through *Stephania* and, consequently, hope to sow the seeds for future field of investigation that focuses on what the closet drama genre reveals about the performance of sexuality as depicted in Bradley and Cooper's dramatic canon and evidenced in their correspondence and journals.

because the dramas are still fairly neglected in Field scholarship, and *Stephania* itself has little to no study, I want to resurrect the closet drama as a major part of Bradley and Cooper's legacy.[9]

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I will provide a brief background of why Bradley and Cooper created Michael Field and how that identity was positioned at the time of *Stephania's* printing. I will also situate *Stephania* inside the "closet" of Decadence, by giving an overview of that artistic movement and showing how Bradley and Cooper censured the decay and demoralization of Decadence. In the second section, I will explain how *Stephania* castigated the male participants of the Decadent movement through its revision of closet drama convention. This will lead me to illustrate how Bradley and Cooper, through *Stephania*, transformed the Decadent trope of the courtesan into an authoritative performance for women. Finally, I will demonstrate how the trialogue form of *Stephania* places power in the hands of a woman, of women, upsetting the male, homosocial dominance of the conventional erotic triangle.

Michael Field and Decadence

Like Stephania employing the guise of a courtesan to infiltrate Otho's palace, Bradley and Cooper invented the persona of Michael Field in 1884 to

[9] *Stephania* has not been the subject of singular study, but has been mentioned in a few texts, including Emma Donoghue's biography *We Are Michael Field* and David Moriarty's article, "'Michael Field' and Male Critics." Recently, in *Michael Field and Their World*, edited by Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson, Joseph Bristow in his article, "Michael Field's Lyrical Aestheticism: Underneath the Bough," boiled *Stephania* down to the description Field's "exploration of a Roman woman's sexual subjection" (51).

enter the "male" palace of Art, cloaking both their gender and their collaboration. They hoped the secret identity would give them an unbiased critique of their literary endeavors — a "real criticism, such as man gives man" (Sturge Moore 6), as they told friend and mentor Robert Browning. In fact, Bradley urged Browning to keep their secret, fearing "the report of lady authorship [would] dwarf and enfeeble [their] work at every turn" (Sturge Moore 6). As avid readers of Wordsworth, Bradley and Cooper were familiar with his definition of a poet as a "man speaking to men" (*Lyrical Ballads*) and were concerned that a woman poet would not be accepted, or heard, speaking the language of men.[10] But much of this anxiety about their place as women came from much closer sources, like their admiration for, and eventual relationship with, Walter Pater, an idol whom they grew to love and call Tottie (Donoghue 55). Bradley had a painful awareness of the following remarks in Pater's essay, "Style" (1889):

> The literary artist is of necessity a scholar, and in what he proposes to do will have in mind, first of all, the scholar and the scholarly conscience — the male conscience in this matter, as we must think it, under a system of education which still to so large an extent limits real scholarship to men. (64)

Throughout their lives, Bradley and Cooper would seek out every educational

[10] As exemplified in April 1890 journal entries (*Journals and Correspondence*), when Edith mentions that they were reading constantly, particularly Wordsworth's *Odes on the Intimations of Immortality.* The quotation referencing a poet as a "man speaking to men" comes from Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1802).

opportunity open to them[11]; however, Pater's identification of the "literary artist" as "scholar" and, in turn, the "scholarly conscience" as the "male conscience" stuck with Bradley so much she once told Oscar Wilde how hurt she was by that very comment (Sturge Moore 137, qtd. in Leighton 218). The idea of the "scholarly conscience" — and in conjunction, the identity of the "literary artist" — being male affected Cooper as well. During an encounter

[11]Some background on Bradley and Cooper's education and family life: Bradley and Cooper recognized and envied the options available to men, particularly with regard to their education and career path. In preparation for a socially prescribed future as a wife and mother, Bradley as a child was tutored at home in the "genteel pursuits" of Romance languages, Classics, music, and painting (Donoghue 14). Though she loved learning and was "fearless in libraries," she resisted the direction chosen for her and her older sister Lissie (Cooper's mother); "marriage seemed a risk and a sacrifice," especially when it came to childbirth and child-rearing (Donoghue 14-15). However, Lissie became "perpetually feeble" after Cooper's birth, and Bradley was left to care for both her sister and her niece, along with her own mother, who was struck by cancer (Donoghue 15-17). Bradley's father had died years earlier, and James Cooper, Bradley's brother-in-law, left the household duties to the women so he could pursue his business, his worship, and his hobbies (Donoghue 15). Though Bradley loved her family and felt a connection to Cooper early on, she grew frustrated with her assigned role as family caretaker and longed for time alone so she could write (Donoghue 22). During this time, she lashed out in her diary: "Wild gusts of passion sweep over me, & leave me desolated in body & spirit. At such times, I feel evil as a strong man within me" (Donoghue 17). Bradley connects this surge of resentment, these "wild gusts of passion," to being "evil as a strong man," and when these gusts blow through, they leave her "desolated" inside and out. What remains is a woman unfulfilled "in body & spirit," depleted of "passion." The "strong man within her" symbolizes a certain freedom of emotion that she cannot show on a daily basis or even have, a yearning to be as uninhibited, unencumbered, and powerful as only a man could be. Those feelings are "evil," inappropriate and wrong for the roles she must play. Donoghue quotes Bradley as saying she "was made for something nobler than to be an old spinster aunt" (17). For Bradley, a "nobler" future meant furthering her education, to the extent possible as a woman of the time. In the years to come, after her mother's death, she traveled to France to attend classes at the Collège de France (which was free and open to everyone) and later took a summer course offered at Newnham College, the newly created women's college of Cambridge (Donoghue 22). In between bouts of her studies away from home, Bradley tutored Cooper and her younger sister Amy, and when Cooper was sixteen and the family — Bradley, Cooper, Amy, and Cooper's parents — moved to Stoke Bishop, a suburb of Bristol, Bradley and Cooper attended daily lectures at University College Bristol (Donoghue 33).

with literary critic Lionel Johnson after a lecture, Cooper found herself prattling, shaking, and nervous. In their diary, she chides what she sees as her female behavior, suggesting that in her public anxiety she "demonstrate[s] that woman cannot have the scholarly conscience. I am an occasion for cynicism — a stumbling-block to youth, the sensibility of male youth: a dream turned into a nightmare, perchance!" (Sturge Moore 192, qtd. in Leighton 218). Only a "male youth" could "dream" of having a "scholarly conscience," while she, a woman, could only "turn [it] into a nightmare."

In their joint diary, Bradley often recorded her recognition and envy of the expressive and creative options available to men, as in this brief rant:

> What good times men have, what pipes, what deep communings!. . . yet if women seek to learn their art from life, instead of what the angels bring down to them in dishes, they simply get defamed. (Sturge Moore 202, qtd. in Leighton 218)

Bradley and Cooper sought the "good times" of men, envied the brotherhood that could sit around smoking and partaking in"deep communings." Yet the two women felt the "good times" of life were, for their gender, limited to heavenly fare, and, if they expressed want for anything more, they would be "defamed." However, by taking on a male pseudonym, they could, as Bradley wrote in a letter to Browning, sidestep "drawing room conventionalities" and say things "the world [would] not tolerate from a woman's lips" (Sturge Moore 6). In constructing Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper thought they could

not only access an exclusive realm of male privileges, but could grasp the power that came with artistic manhood, the power to skip public and private "conventionalities," the power to say and write what they wished without shocking or offending "the world." With Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper used the male-identified "scholarly conscience" to promote dramas that dealt with brutal kings, women in positions of authority, Machiavellian politics, sins of the father and son, tyrannical governments, and desire — both male and female, and combinations thereof — all thinly veiled social and political commentaries.[12]

Yet interestingly, at the time *Stephania* was published, the "secret identity" of Michael Field was out; most of Bradley and Cooper's literary coterie knew the two women were behind the pseudonym. In essence then, *Stephania* was neither fully produced by nor fully filtered through the "man" who had been guaranteed an audience because of "his" gender. By this time, Michael Field had become a socially-recognized male performance publicly put on by two women; *Stephania*, as published by the women acting as Michael Field, was a work in which the "conscience" of the "literary artist" was — doubly — female. In fact, after the publication of *Stephania*, Bradley announces in a letter to a friend that "[*Stephania*] is a woman's book, & women must defend it. Except for a few dusty old cousins, all my women friends rejoice in *Stephania*. ... Men of course don't like this" (Donoghue 77). Bradley di-

[12]Their poetry has been studied as social, cultural, and political commentary, especially with regard to gender play and sexuality, but little has been written on the socio-political commentary presented in their dramas.

rectly classifies *Stephania* as a "woman's book," yet at the time the novel, not the closet drama, was traditionally the "woman's book," or the predominant "woman's" genre of the time. Even earlier, as Bradley and Cooper finished writing *Stephania* (originally titled *Otho*), Bradley wrote: "Otho exists as a completed conception. To be altered yes — but henceforth a work to be read from cover to cover. I can walk about now with the certain step of men."[13] Bradley sees herself as walking not as a man but "with the certain step" of "men" and thus claims herself "with" or equal to a man. As mentioned in my Introduction to this dissertation, the closet drama, especially one which tended toward introspection or historical subjects, was a dying masculine breed which, more than once, friends like George Moore advised Bradley and Cooper to revise or stop writing.[14]

Although writing about events of centuries past allowed Bradley and Cooper to address and challenge contemporary issues indirectly and from a safe distance, Field's loyalty to a historical genre, in a world where realism was a trend both on the page and on the stage, eventually grew too stale and stodgy for the reading public. Bradley and Cooper, in entries of their joint journal dated August 1890, recognized that they needed to curb their "haphazard development of plot" to create a more "firm, pliant structure."[15] Over the next year, they would birth a "firm, pliant structure" in *Stephania*,

[13]Friday, November 29, 1891; *Journals and Correspondence*.

[14]August 18, 1890. Folio 98, MS. Eng.misc.b.47., from the archive at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[15]August 13, 1890. Folio 109, From Add Mss 46780; Folio 16 in *Journals and Correspondence*.

a streamlined, simplified structure that would showcase the will of a woman as sprung from two female heads, or rather from a literary artist's doubly "female" conscience.

This "woman's book," so proclaimed by a pair of ambitious "spinsters," did not play well at a time when Victorian women as a whole were asserting themselves more and more through societal and political activism, with employment and education opportunities, and in the literary marketplace. *Stephania*, with its cross-gender author(s) and its avenging female protagonist, represented this social and cultural invasion of womanhood and began to attack the Decadent dogma that had mutated and risen from Pater's Aesthetic philosophies born some years earlier.[16]

Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) inspired Bradley and Cooper, as well as an enthusiastic fellowship of other writers and artists (which included Lionel Johnson, Alice Meynell, Oscar Wilde, and George Moore), to uphold the motto "art for art's sake" and to use that motto to develop a religion of art based on the idea of personal transcendence through the creation of beauty.[17] The basis for Pater's aesthetic "religion" came from

[16]Though other artists ran with *l'art pour l'art* and other principles that resonated with Pater, Pater "seems to have been the single most important influence on their writing" (Leighton 215). This verse from Field's closet drama *Callirrhoë* reflects his aesthetic ideas: "All art is ecstasy,/All literature expression of intense/Enthusiasm: be beside yourself./If a god violate your shrinking soul/Suffer sublimely."

[17]Théophile Gautier is credited with originating the phrase "art for art's sake" in France, though Désiré Nisard brought it to England in 1837 (Fletcher 16–18). For information on Pater's aestheticism, see Chapter 4, "Masculinity Transformed," in Herbert Sussman's *Victorian Masculinities*.

a long-standing tradition of artistic manhood. For Pater, art was all about reflecting the intense experience of the male psyche held still on the brink of ecstasy, as shown in his critique, "Poems by William Morris" (1868): "A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliance and relief — all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears" (Pater, *Westminster Review* 145, qtd. in Sussman 177). In Pater's philosophy, when the male "outlets are sealed," the passion builds; the "tension of nerve" "comes" to a head, so to speak, resulting in a rush of "blood," making a man's perception of the world — and hence, his artistic "output" — shine with "reinforced brilliance." Pater's metaphorical language in his essay on Morris undeniably brings to mind the image of a sustained erection, as does his famous quotation: "To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (Pater, Conclusion 148, qtd. in Sussman 197). Pater defined manhood and art by what I call "mental Viagra," a man's constant and unremitting personal determination to keep desire "burn[ing] always" inside, rather than to permit the chaotic release of "seminal energy" that could result if allowed (Sussman 197, 200). But if achieving artistic beauty grew from a man bolstering a "hard gem-like flame," then artistic beauty went "flaccid," to borrow another word from Pater, when a woman was involved. For this reason, Pater viewed artistic endeavors as a male "refuge, a sort of cloistral refuge, from certain vulgarity in the actual world" (Pater, *Appr.* 18). Pater, like Thomas Carlyle before him, advocated the idea of an "all male society of the cloister" that would

devote itself to art through a monastic tenet of self-control (Sussman 3, 5).[18] But unlike Carlyle who sought to repress sexuality in that sanctuary, Pater believed artistic achievement arose from the tension that derived from a man's "unrealized desire" for other men, as Herbert Sussman suggests in *Victorian Masculinities* (189).

However, while Pater sought the epitome of spirituality and beauty through "monastic discipline, Greek ascêsis, and male comradeship" (Hanson 178), Oscar Wilde and his circle changed up the ideals a bit. In the words of Richard Le Gallienne, Victorian poet, essayist, and critic, Wilde "popularized, and indeed somewhat vulgarized, as he perhaps to a degree misunderstood, and certainly dangerously applied, the gospel of beauty and 'ecstasy' which Pater taught with hierarchical reserve" (Seiler 157). Pater had been concerned that some readers might misconstrue and misuse his words; in fact, he removed *The Conclusion* from the second edition of *The Renaissance* (1877) in case his tenet might beguile or delude his young male readers (Dowling 3). In *The Conclusion*, Pater writes:

> [W]e are all condamnés, as Victor Hugo says . . . , [W]e have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. [. . .] [O]ur one chance is expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations

[18] A bit about Carlyle: Bradley and Cooper read Carlyle's *Past and Present*, which compared the lives of a medieval abbot and a nineteenth-century man and championed communal values. Carlyle wrote about an all male community excluding females (Sussman 17); wrote *Phallus Worship* (1848) in which he sees "sexualized desire as danger to social order" (Sussman 36); and advocated chaste masculine bonding (Sussman 74).

> as possible into the given time. High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy, and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the 'enthusiasm of humanity.' Only, be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. (Pater 41)

The Conclusion did, in fact, exact a virulent reaction from those who were disgusted by what they viewed as "a soulless hedonism" (Dowling 111). Some readers, shocked by the idea of filling life, or one's personal "interval," with "as many pulsations" or "high passions" as one can, viewed Pater's following as a "cult of intense experiences" (Dowling 180).[19] Suddenly, followers of Aestheticism seemed to strive to express "the enthusiasm of humanity" and "high passions" over artistic technique.

The principles of Aestheticism began to grow Decadent as Pater's "cultivation of the beautiful experience for its own sake was replaced as an artistic credo by the cultivation of any experience for its own sake" (Small xii, qtd. in Primamore 51). Experiences considered perverse or unnatural were extremely

[19]For instance, John Wordsworth, grand-nephew of William Wordsworth, former student of Pater, and eventual colleague at Brasenose College in Oxford, wrote him about *The Conclusion* not long after the book's initial printing (Dellamora 158-159). Wordsworth, in echo of many other men within the college and outside in the press, reprimanded Pater for perpetuating the dangerous idea that "no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment," as well as for inspiring that idea in "minds weaker than [Pater's] own" (Wordsworth letters, qtd. in Dellamora 158-159). Pater, having already been passed over for a professorial promotion at Oxford and wanting to prevent another professional snub, revised and reprinted *The Renaissance* without its conclusion (Dellamora 158-159). But his words had already made a great impression on many.

idealized, carefully designed to undermine traditional morés (Hanson 3). Talia Schaffer calls the Decadent style a "brief defensive reaction of embattled male writers who perceived themselves to be losing status to popular women writers and consequently fetishized their own decay" (6). Ian Fletcher's borrowed description of Decadence from Théophile Gautier characterizes this fetishization:

> it is ingenious, learned, complicated, diseased, "gamy," nuanced, borrowing from all the technical vocabularies, expressing the vaguest and most fleeting of contours, alert to the subtle confidences of the neuropath, the avowals of ageing or depraved passion, and the singular hallucinations of the idée fixe. (Fletcher 10)

This Decadent revision of Pater's "art for art's sake" ideal transformed his religion of "high passions" into a religion of "ageing or depraved passion" practiced, or "hallucinate[d]," by men truly "condamnés" in the eyes of society (as well as in their own). With the enactment of the Labouchère Amendment of 1885 in which any male homosexual act, whether public or private, was deigned against the law, Decadent men moved their close male relationships — and their art, which often reflected their relationships — deeper into both literal and figurative closets.[20]

[20]Certainly, one could debate that Oscar Wilde was not concealing much in the public eye, but I would argue that his careful control of his public image, his persona, was in many ways a closet. Support of this idea might be seen in the incident following the exposure at his trial of his intimate letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, sent from Reading Gaol. In the letter, Wilde recalls being humiliated at the train station when he waits to be taken away to jail: he weeps at the loss of the personal walls he had meticulously constructed around him, exposed to the elements as he "stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a

Richard Le Gallienne, though often categorized with the Decadents because of his literary style, comments on what he sees as this downward spiral from Aestheticism to Decadence in a prefatory poem titled and addressed "To the Reader" in his volume of *English Poems* (1892):

> Art was a palace once, things great and fair,
> And strong and holy, found a temple there:
> Now 'tis a lazar-house of leprous men.

For Le Gallienne, Pater's "great and fair," "strong and holy," palace of Art has been transformed into a "house" of diseased, "leprous" male bodies, a common metaphor for male homosexuality as a pestilence, plague, or malady.[21] Ellis Hanson in *Decadence and Catholicism* suggests that male Decadents used the highly wrought language of illness, perversity, and degeneracy to scandalize, even "shock conventional morality" (3). The seedy contagiousness of Decadence was infesting what was once an artistic "temple." For Le Gallienne, for Bradley and Cooper, it had to stop.

Bradley and Cooper were extremely critical of art, theirs and everyone else's, and their devotion to "Pater's 'clean' aestheticism" (despite Pa-

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jeering mob" (*De Profundis* 491). For a more detailed portrayal of Wilde's emotional state in the letter, read Oliver Buckton's "Desire Without Limits: Dissident Confession in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*" in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[21] As suggested in Gregory Tomso's *The Queer History of Leprosy and Same-Sex Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 747, 773. In Tomso's footnotes, he reveals that "in nineteenth-century medical discourse, leprosy and homosexuality were given the same name, satyriasis."

ter's gender bias) led them to denounce "the more perverse forms of decadence" (Leighton 217). Though Bradley and Cooper themselves were considered Decadent in style by many, *Stephania* undoubtedly confronts the ways in which Decadence was seen as corrupting Victorian masculinity, and as a result, art itself.[22] In "Roba di Roma," printed in Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* (December 1890), the anonymous author writes: "There is no period in the history of the popes more stained with crime than that of the three Othos" (771). Thus, to the reader of *Stephania*, Stephania, in identifying herself as Rome well into decay under the imperial reign of Otho III, represents both fin de siècle England and its palace (or empire) of art - as threatened by the same condition. In addition, to many Victorians, this homosexual ignominy spreading through Victorian society and illustrated through its Decadent art, as Elaine Showalter in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* notes, resembled the same type of "immorality" that had led to the downfall of the Greek and Roman Empires and predicted a similar fate for

[22]From a letter from Theodore Maynard, who wrote an article on Bradley and Cooper after their deaths to Thomas Sturge Moore, their literary executor who was a bit taken aback by the label: "I don't think it is critically unsound to say that your friends were at one time 'decadent', tho' some readers might misunderstand the expression. Of course 'Michael Field' was not decadent in the sense that Wilde was decadent, but he was nearer the literary school (by a long way) than were the two poets you mention. Browning & Meredith seem to me to be about unlike decadents as it is possible to be. Probably we mean different things by the word. I understand it to describe a certain unnatural union of paganism & mysticism which, when attempted, brings about the disease & then the decay of both" (Folio 19, MS.Eng.lett.c.433). Moore's response, edited for clarity: "...I appreciate the kindness of your concession over the footnotes and only regret that I failed to persuade you over the wholely unjustifiable use of the words, 'decadent of the decadents.' [Y]ou couldn't have used stronger of Wilde himself Rimbaud or Verlaine. [...]I begin to doubt whether you have ever read [a] major portion of the work of Michael Field, finding you so ready to justify a perfectly preposterous phrase" (Folio 20).

England (3). Showalter quotes from "The Political Value of Social Purity," an article printed in *The Sentinel*, September 1885: " 'If England falls,' one clergyman warned, 'it will be this sin, and her unbelief in God, that will have been her ruin'" (3-4). When Stephania recounts the experience of her rape, which occurred before the drama opens, during her first official introduction to Otho she eloquently describes her subsequent change in being and credits her lush manner of speaking by admitting, "In my womanhood/I was a poet" (I, 571-572). In reclaiming Otho's moribund Roman empire, Stephania will restore the power of her artistic womanhood and thusly will revive national identity along with "poet[ic]" tradition.

In her essay, "Tyranny of Women" (1894), artist and journalist Ellen Gosse satirically portrays women as the saviors of England against a weakening male Roman Empire:

> [S]ocial Boadiceas are sweeping everything before them with a "fierce volubility." Every year some fresh outpost goes down, and the Roman boy, in the "tender effeminacy" of his politics . . . hears the enemy ever louder at his gate. Bloodily, bloodily falls the battleaxe, and one by one the privileges of men are falling. (qtd. in Showalter 24)

Though published two years after the publication of Field's *Stephania*, Gosse's metaphorical casting of Victorian women as Boadicea, a legendary queen who led an uprising of ancient British tribes against the Romans in 60 AD, not to

mention the male Decadents as the "Roman boy, in the 'tender effeminacy'of his politics" anticipating the invasion at any minute by a female "enemy," aptly reflects the story of Stephania, an Empress wronged, who "sweep[s]" into Emperor Otho's "fresh outpost," flings open the "gate," and restores order to a land Otho had poached by murdering her husband.[23] To relate this imagery back to Le Gallienne's poetic observation, Stephania raids the artistic empire of "leprous men" in order to reinstate something "great and fair," "strong and holy." In the final verses of the drama, Stephania declares that her "love" herded the "wicked into hell" (III, 821-822); she "is rid of the usurper" (III, 827) and has "cleansed herself" (III, 821) and the palace. With this in mind, the doors to what Gosse sees as a closet of "tender effeminacy" and passivity are flung open. In *Stephania*, Rome, England, and the palace of art are saved from Decadence. Bradley and Cooper have decided that women will be the new rulers of country and art.

Stephania takes place in a "lazar-house" of sorts as the action of the drama is confined to Otho's palace and the pageantry "great and fair" of Rome has disappeared under Otho's leadership. Nineteenth-century historians viewed the real Otho as "at once vehement and vacillating, melancholy and excitable — by turns the victim of violent fits of remorse and devotion, during which he was guilty of gross cruelties and crimes" (*Edinburgh Magazine* 773). For Bradley and Cooper, who did a vast amount of research, Otho

[23]In ancient Rome, Roman men could only claim masculinity if they had the "insertive role in penetrative acts" (Williams 125). If not, they were considered effeminate. Effeminacy was a Decadent trait.

and his Empire were the perfect choice to represent the heart of a Decadent civilization.[24]

Otho is a young man of 21 when the drama opens three years after he marched on Rome, hung the Consul Crescentius high on the battlements of Castle St. Angelo, and set about restoring what he saw as the glory days of the Roman Empire.[25] Otho's vision for a new Rome has not materialized; the citizens are on the verge of revolt, the ancient pomp and spectacle he had fought for nowhere to be found. He blames Gerbert, his right-hand man so to speak, for leading him down this path of blind ambition. Gerbert, also named Pope Sylvester II, symbolizes the Roman Empire, the power wielded by the unification of political and religious institutions. Although Gerbert has a mystical past in learning "wizardry" from the Moors in his younger days,

[24]In "More Roba Di Roma," a collection of essays about Italian culture and history by William Wetmore Story included in the December 1870 issue of Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine*, Otho is described with characteristics of a decadent: "In character he was at once vehement and vacillating, melancholy and excitable — by turns the victim of violent fits of remorse and devotion, during which he was guilty of gross cruelties and crimes, and of equally violent fits of remorse and devotion, during which he strove to expiate his offenses by long pilgrimages, penances, fasts, and superstitious rites[.]" In "Roba Di Roma," Story juxtaposes the state of mid-nineteenth-century Rome against its rich history, compelling nineteenth-century readers to see how both Romes reflect each other (New York: Leonard Scott Publishing Co., 1870).

[25]Field's interpretation of Otho's story adheres closely to the reported history of the actual Emperor Otto III: while Consul Crescentius ruled Rome in Otho's stead under a peaceful republic and subjected the papal authority to civil authority, Emperor Otto decided to take his rightful place as leader of the empire. Otho and Crescentius did indeed battle. Otho offered Crescentius a deal, which Crescentius accepted under false pretenses. Otho hung Crescentius on the castle battlements. There are many versions of Otho's final demise. Bradley and Cooper began researching the history in 1890; they visited archives in the British Museum, read Bryce's *Holy Roman Empire* (1887) and went to Germany to visit Otho's tomb. See the 1890 entries from *Journals and Correspondence* and Donoghue, 61.

he has become a political player (I, 8-9) and wants to keep Otho's attention on battling to save Rome. However, Gerbert does not encourage this imperial warfare simply to build a divine empire. Nor does he stay by Otho's side merely to strategize and conquer. In *Victorian Masculinities*, Sussman claims that in circumstances of war "close masculinities bonding into adult life [was] permitted within a warrior model of masculinity" (49). For Gerbert, war and empire-building sanction intimacy with Otho.

For Bradley and Cooper, Gerbert's love for Otho reflects the controlled, yet erotic, passions advocated in Pater's artistic cloister. Gerbert conveys his mental and spiritual love for Otho through a language of eroticism and longing, as evidenced by this image Gerbert uses to describe for Stephania his love for Otho:

> . . . It is unsupportable
> To breathe beside him with the consciousness
> That he is growing alien — whom I love
> With such constriction of the heart, my prayers
> Grow ruddy as with life-blood at his name,
> Who is my dream incarnate, half my God. (II, 126-131)

In the tradition of Pater, whose passion rises and all "the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliance and relief — all redness is turned into blood," Gerbert's "prayers grow ruddy as with life-blood" with the invocation of Otho's name. Otho is his "dream incarnate, half [his] God," his path to

transcendence into beauty. The relationship between Otho and Gerbert began in the institutional "cloister" (I, 413) when Otho was 15 and Gerbert's pupil, but to Gerbert's disappointment, Otho pulled away from the tutelage and went his own way, questioning Gerbert's motives and teachings. Bradley and Cooper treat Gerbert with compassion, almost as if he is Pater himself, yet also portray the relationship as constricting, claustrophobic, and crumbling.[26] Gerbert feels Otho "growing alien" because of his attraction to what Romuald, the zealous hermit practicing his religion in far-off countryside caves, can offer. Romuald, like Gerbert and Otho, is also based on a historical figure; in contrast to Gerbert, he railed against the hierarchical and excessive behavior of religious authority and sought to transform the world into a hermitage where no privilege, rank, or institutional regimen existed (Damian). Following historical record, the Otho in *Stephania* supports Romuald, to Gerbert's dismay, and longs to relinquish his duty to the Holy Roman Empire so he can become devoted solely to the hermit. In the drama, Bradley and Cooper play up Gerbert's fears that Otho's actions will be their joint fall into what the drama projects as depravity, rather than their joint transcendence into Beauty/Power.

The unbridled, spiritual relationship between Romuald (who never physically appears en scène) and Otho represents what, to Bradley and Cooper,

[26]Though I'm not certain if Bradley and Cooper were aware, Pater, like Gerbert was known to have had relationships with younger men; well-known was Pater's relationship with 19-year old William Money Hardinge that cost Pater a university proctorship (Hanson 174–75). See Ellis Hanson's chapter on "Pater Dolorosa" in *Decadence and Catholicism*.

was the messy turn from Pater's disciplined, mental ecstasy of Aestheticism to the debauched and uncontrolled physical desire of Decadence. Otho's conflict is illustrated through his account to Gerbert, early in the drama, of his confession at Romuald's "cavern in the hill" (I, 249). His physical encounter with Romuald is one of renitence and acquiescence. When Otho arrived at Romuald's "grot," he found repentance for Cresentius' murder "in [Romuald's] arms" and "lost himself" in the hermit's presence (I, 244-245, 255, 258). Later, Otho "lay down" (I, 275) with Romuald and, in the morning, was awakened by Romuald's kiss: "A touch/woke me at last between my eyes that opened/To see the saint's mouth clingingly withdrawn" (I, 275, 278-280). But the language blurs to depict the scene as more like a rape:

> Beneath his passion
> Almost I yielded but the breeze was strong,
> In the cold brightness ere the sun was risen
> I thought of how my army to the trumpet
> Replied with life; an eagle on the sky
> Went past; I snatched my toga from the floor,
> And then there was no colour to be seen
> Throughout the earthy dwelling-place. I broke
> A crust, I tried to drink beneath those brows
> Planted above me, till in fear I rose
> As if to go: he asked me of my choice,
> But in my face he found not what he sought.
> I strove, I parried, I implored, I made
> Wavering conditions[.] (I, 284-297)

Otho's vacillation is evidenced by his fear and by his physical response to Romuald's advances: Otho finds himself aroused "with life" by the encounter, but as an emperor who has only commanded other men to have sex (as seen in his order of Stephania's rape which he does not join), and has not had sex himself, he is confused by the enticing call of the trumpet, what could be read as both a military call and as Romuald's phallic "trumpet," and tries to flee the monk's dark earthy "dwelling place." This scene depicts Otho's struggle with both his identity and his desires. Shall he, as a soldier of Empire, resist and control his passion, or shall he become a soldier of God and give in to his physical nature like Romuald?

The night after his visit with Romuald, on the move with his army, Otho weeps in private over this personal dilemma (I, 326–328). He wonders if he has sinned, and if he is worthy — even manly enough — to control an empire. He went to Romuald for redemption, but found himself emotionally and physically disturbed. Yet he is still attracted to the religious life of solitude Romuald offers. Ultimately he considers himself, to recall Victor Hugo's *condamné*, "damned in [his] very destiny" (I, 693) and anguishes about being caught between the lives of Gerbert and Romuald: "I perish/Between them, yearning for such unity/As they proclaim impossible" (II, 391-392). The drama presents both options as unnatural and unhealthy, on a personal level and a national level. In Act One, Otho accuses Gerbert of making him "sway a vacant kingdom" (I, 187); Otho, under Gerbert's mentoring, remains a virgin emperor; therefore, the kingdom remains vacant like an empty womb since

its leader is not populating the Empire. If he were to align himself with Romuald, a zealot wanting to populate the Roman Empire with hermitages and monasteries, Otho would also surrender his empire to infertility, as Romuald seeks to create a world of men and solitude. Additionally, Otho would sacrifice himself, in Gerbert's words, to "[a] creature skilled to blemish and deflower" (II, 7) and would be "unmanned" (II, 276).

In speaking with Gerbert and having her own brief encounter with Romuald (off-page) when she was left to wander after her rape,[27] Stephania realizes that Otho's connection to either man bodes badly for Rome's future, and on a metaphorical/thematic level, neither option bodes any better for England. The stylistic and metaphorical treatment of the homosocial relationships in *Stephania* suggest that any society or vocation limited to the "male conscience" has inherent weakness and is certain to founder from its sterility. But since Otho "cannot quit the rule of men" (II, 622), as he tells Stephania, the fertility and survival of Rome — hence, the fertility and the survival of England, of Art — depends on Stephania. At the start of the drama, she speaks of poisonous spices wafting through the palace:

> There are perfumes here
> Full of spices that grow old in tombs,
> Soft, penetrative scents that shaken out

[27] After she was left to die in the camp, she wandered into the hills and found herself at Romuald's cave. She asked for his help and kissed his feet, at which point he became violent and beastly, crying "as he were bitten by a serpent's fang" and clawing at her (II, 75-84).

Spread poison, but are fatal being breathed
By one without suspicion as in sleep. (I, 10–14)

The poison could very well come from the censer Stephania "clasps," as noted in the stage directions, which might indicate that she has spread the fatal poison which ultimately kills Otho. Yet at the same time, since historical myths disagree about whether or not the real Stephania killed Emperor Otho III by poison, this Stephania could be using the censer, or incense vessel, to *cleanse* the palace of the "poison" that already seeps through the palace in the form of Gerbert and Otho's patriarchal, homosocial, and "vacant" Roman Catholic Decadence. On the level of metanarrative, *Stephania* could represent a censer itself, its rich imagery, as exemplified by this passage, a poison that Bradley and Cooper created in the name of cleansing Beauty and Art. But as Bradley and Cooper adopted the language of Decadence, infusing passion with the metaphor of disease and death, to tell the story, the drama became "fatal being breathed" by its Decadent readership.[28]

"Shaping Forth My Eager Thoughts": Rehabilitating the Closet Drama

Bradley and Cooper's choice to employ and renovate the closet drama genre with *Stephania* seems purposeful and innovative, especially when evaluated alongside the rest of Michael Field's vast closet drama canon. Michael

[28]In fact, at the time of *Stephania*'s publication, Nietzche frequently employed the French word *décadent* to paint the Church as "the epitome of all that [was] weak, archaic, and irrational in modern civilization" (Hanson 8).

Field's closet drama was usually characterized by genre convention: blank verse form, large cast of characters (or Dramatis Personae), and historical, mythical, or supernatural themes. Similar to others of the genre, many of Field's dramas were deemed either too large or too "interior" to be portrayed on the stage and thus remained in their "literary" form. The pace of dialogue was also noted as being too slow and speeches too long. For example, *The Tragic Mary* (1890), the drama published just before *Stephania*, with its cast of twenty-four-plus characters, follows a traditional five-act style made popular by the Roman philosopher/dramatist Seneca and adopted by Elizabethan dramatists, including Shakespeare, whom Bradley and Cooper greatly revered. The drama's "Elizabethan" form seems appropriate to chronicle the story of Mary, Queen of Scots, especially since it takes place during her cousin Elizabeth I's reign as Queen of England. However, *The Tragic Mary* received hit-and-miss reviews (Donoghue 56), and Bradley and Cooper, as noted earlier in this chapter, felt pressure to change.

In analyzing the importance of Bradley and Cooper's choice and revision of the closet drama form, I want to look briefly at two other fictional works of the nineteenth-century that dealt with the same "Stephania" history: Felicia Hemans' *Widow of Crescentius* (1812) and W.W. Story's *Stephania: A Tragedy in Five Acts with a Prologue* (1875). In Hemans' long narrative poem *Widow of Crescentius*, after Stephania's husband Crescentius is killed, she disguises herself not as a courtesan, but as a minstrel-boy named Guido to entertain, endear herself to, and eventually poison Otho. This costuming

obviously generates bold questions about gender, sexuality, and pederasty, as does the narrator's erotic language, exemplified by the moment when "Otho bids [the boy's] lay" (II, 175) and another orgasmic moment when, as the boy plays his harp, Otho's "lip is quivering, and his breast/Heaves with convulsive pangs oppress'd," "his dim eye seems fix'd and glazed;/And now to heaven in anguish raised." (II, 241–244). The double entendre and homoerotic allusion in Hemans' version is much like that in Field's *Stephania*, particularly in its depiction of the relationships among Gerbert, Otho, and Romuald. However in *Widow*, Stephania's agency only goes as far as her disguise; in telling Stephania's story as a long poetic narrative in two parts, the narrator, who is never identified, restricts the tale to a third-person omniscient and consequently filters Stephania's thoughts, emotions, and words, not to mention controls the construction of her identity. Stephania is a "hero's bride" (II, 275), as she reveals (in dialogue) to Otho near the end of the poem, and "live[s] for one dread task alone" (II, 286) — Crescentius' glory. But this mission seals her fate: she emphatically bids Otho's court to "lead [her] to death" (II, 305), and at the end of the poem, the narrator assures the reader that indeed she will "find repose" (II, 322). Death was a common and accepted end for a woman in Victorian literature, the "ultimate sacrifice of her being to the males she had been born to serve" (Dijkstra 29). Though Stephania's death could be, at first, read as a noble sacrifice, in the final four lines of the poem, the narrator announces that her deed, her actions, will be forgotten with her grave: "And o'er thy dark and lowly bed/The sons of future days shall tread/The

pangs, the conflicts of thy lot,/By them unknown, by thee forgot." It seems that Stephania, as the *Widow*, begins and ends as the subject of another Romantic elegy, one that the narrator intends to bury with her, cross-dressing minstrel-song lost.[29]

More in line in terms of genre with Field's approach, Story's *Stephania* is a closet drama, yet has twenty characters and a five-act Senecan/Elizabethan form. Both Hemans' Stephania and Story's Stephania only have one purpose: to avenge her husband's murder. But while Hemans' Stephania, in executing her plan, has sorrow in her face and occasionally a flash of "troubled mystery" (II, 162), Story's Stephania is, right from the prologue, akin to Lady MacBeth and the femme fatale. The closet drama genre, with its structure founded on non-mediated dialogue, presents Stephania with the ability to speak her own mind, and Story uses the opportunity to the fullest. When Crescentius tells Stephania his plan to surrender to Otho, she balks at his decision:

> [W]eak woman though I am —
> No strength but heart — I would have fought it out
> While one red drop of blood ran in these veins.
> I would have courted death — rushed to it glad
> As to a bridegroom — flung me in his arms.(I, 230–235)

[29]Hemans was known for her literary piousness, sweet language, and "mothering voice" that bespoke true womanhood (Leighton 16). Yet Angela Leighton in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* does credit Hemans with "liberat[ing] the idea of the woman poet from the . . . denials of history" (40–41).

This Stephania expresses her mettle from the start, and at Crescentius' suggestion that she submit to Otho, she vehemently refuses. Not long after, when Crescentius is led away by Otho's men, Stephania vows: "God shall avenge him: if not God, then I" (374).

Instead of playing the courtesan or the minstrel-boy, Story's Stephania, living in a convent after her husband's murder, decides to go to an ailing Otho as a veiled nun and healer. She reveals her identity at Otho's insistence, and for the remainder of the drama, tries to play Otho's sympathies as a "poor, weak, broken woman" (IV, 77). At first, Otho is charmed, but soon tires of her when she rejects his sexual advances. When Stephania realizes his plan to oust her from his domain, she poisons him. Similar to Field's Stephania, Story's Stephania transforms herself to execute her revenge. The drama, like Field's, even culminates with a question that seems open-ended: "For me, what now remains?" (V, 91). However, Story's Stephania has only one goal throughout the drama — to honor her husband. She proclaims: "What more do I need/Than the one thought, Crescentius of thee/Dear noble heart" (III, 132–134). In the end, Stephania's purpose is complete, and she finds herself lost. She does not win power for herself or for womanhood. She ends up immobile, inactive, uncertain what to do.

Often a genre of personal immobility, the traditional closet drama was frequently driven by psychological exploration, or inward conflict, rather than character development through action, or external conflict. In this type of closet drama, the drama unfolds in the "closet of the mind" as the male pro-

tagonist in these dramas tends to grow debilitated by his psyche and seeks asylum from his overwhelming emotions. Both Story's version and Field's version of Stephania design the "closet" as a site of physical action. But while many of Story's twenty characters act throughout the drama and his Stephania ends in emotional paralysis, Field's Stephania is the only one who acts to and beyond the end of her story. Thus, by using a dramatic structure (rather than a poetic narrative structure as did Hemans, for example), yet keeping the cast to three, Bradley and Cooper's emphasis on female autonomy, authority, and agency is unmistakable. Three years after *Stephania* was published, Richard Le Gallienne declared that "man for the present seems to be at a standstill, if not actually retrograde, and the onward movement of the world to be embodied in woman" (*Westminster Review* 143, qtd. in Schaffer 24). As a closet drama named for a determined, ambitious woman who includes in her goals "glory to [her] womanhood" (I, 87), *Stephania* rehabilitates a physically repressed genre based on a male's "inward" movement by showcasing a woman's "onward movement."

The setting of *Stephania* provides the first clue. As touched on earlier in this chapter, the three acts are confined to Otho's palace. The palace represents Otho's inward focus; here, he re-evaluates his past, interrogates his future purpose, questions his spirituality. He is anguished, confused: his army has marked the growth of his empire across Italy, yet his victory tastes hollow. Guilt over murdering Crescentius unsettles him, and he longs to repent for his crimes. He wrangles with relinquishing his power and seeking sanctuary

with the hermit Romuald, who aspires to populate Italy with monasteries and hermitages. Otho sees no meaning in the world he conquered and, though only twenty-one, feels blind, damned, and close to death. He is paralyzed with inaction.

While Otho's growing insecurities eventually bloom into madness, Stephania's inward exploration does not crush, torture, or paralyze her, but instead inspires her agency. The narrative of *Stephania* pivots on the way in which Stephania first calculates, then executes her subterfuge; this corporeal manifestation of her thoughts changes a genre — and a place — traditionally confined by philosophical rhetoric and self-exploration into a space of action and change. The drama opens with Stephania alone in a hall of the palace — the "closet" reclaimed by Emperor Otho. Active verbs show her executing her plan as she immediately slips into her role as the "hostess to the foreign guests" who have come to socialize with the new Emperor (I, 2). She meditates aloud about the role she must play as a "courtesan": she will "*offer* welcome," "*diffuse* strange grace," "*breed* the smiles/Men love," "*provide*/The strong incitements of the slave born free," and "*make* vice sibylline" (I, 2-7, emphasis mine). Using her body, "bright with exultation as a shield" (I, 90) and her "vitality" (I, 92), Stephania intends to seduce and murder Otho and seeks revenge against his advisor Gerbert as accomplice to the crime. But even before the drama begins, Stephania has been drawing physical strength and power from her psyche, as noted when she provides a flashback early in the first act. Three years prior to the start of the drama, after her husband Crescentius

was overthrown, Stephania was taken to camp by Otho's troops and, on his orders, raped, "borne away/To degradation" (I, 62-63). At first, she surrendered to her attackers, but when the brutal assault ended, she wasted no time in "musing [her] revenge" (I, 65). Weakened and in shock, she escaped the city and headed into the distant hills, trying both to heal and to make sense of the traumatic events. On the move, she realized that the assault did not mutilate or destroy her spirit, and saw that power still remained in her beauty. Through this self-awareness, this self-consciousness, she recognized her powerful need for justice and reward: she became determined to honor her husband and, at the same time, bring "glory to [her] womanhood" (I, 87). The entire drama is fueled by the physical manifestations of Stephania's will, the female conscience.

Victor Barrucand, in a piece written for an 1895 issue of the avant-garde journal "La Revue blanche,"[30] captured the essence, wiles, and temptations of the type of femme fatale role Stephania was trying to play:

> [W]ith a simple undulation of her rump, she was able to trouble man's brain; and with her slowly insinuating ability to fascinate, she picked apart fortunes, the arts, creeds. Venus-Pandemos[31] tri-

[30] "La Revue blanche" was a journal first printed in Belgium in 1889, but moved to Paris in 1891. The journal catered to a readership of intellectuals and was dedicated to the support and development of art. See Venita Datta's *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999) 31–33.

[31] Grecian surname of Venus Pandemos means "common to all." Also a symbol of prostitution. A temple was built for her with money "public girls" had to pay. (*The Popular*

> umphed over idealistic aspirations; she ridiculed chastity, the family, the fatherland, the future life, drama and the world of dreams. It was the revenge of brute desire, breaking the lyres and the guitars of an aged world's orphic singers whom she had forced into prostration before sex itself. (qtd. in Dijkstra 358, Barrucand 350)

Indeed, Stephania fits Barrucand's vision of prostitute, as she fully intends to "trouble man's brain," to "pic[k] apart fortunes," and to "ridicul[e]" "the fatherland" in her "revenge." She appears to possess the qualities of a "brute" with animalistic desire. She "undulate[s]," "insinuate[s]," "fascinate[s]." She is a woman who cannot be contained in the tenets — or closet — of patriarchal ideals.

This characterization of Stephania can be illuminated against the biblical figure Salome, a popular femme fatale/seductress depicted throughout Victorian literature and art. Bram Dijkstra in his comprehensive *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture* suggests that Salome represented the "inherent perversity of women: their eternal circularity and their ability to destroy the male's soul" (384). During the fin de siècle, Oscar Wilde made Salome a scandalous, self-aware femme fatale and the symbol of Decadence in his play, *Salomé* (1896).[32] In Wilde's version, Salomé aggressively pursues her own desires and becomes obsessed by John

Encyclopedia: Being a General Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, ed. Daniel Keyte Sanford, Thomas Thomson, and Allan Cunningham [Oxford University: Blackie & Son, 1837] 404.)

[32]Wilde wrote the play originally in French and used the French spelling of Salome's name.

the Baptist (Jokanaan), only to cause his execution after he refuses her affection. In the biblical myth, however, Herodias commands her daughter Salome to seduce Herod, her new husband and Salome's stepfather, into ordering the murder — and the plated head — of John the Baptist. No matter the take on her gruesome mission, Salome was often presented as "bestial virgin" of deadly desires (Dijkstra 386), and, in plotting Otho's demise through the persona of a courtesan, Stephania, like Salome, is classified by this "bestial" role of seduction. Yet Stephania is not motivated by "brute desire," as Barrucand suggests of Wilde's Salomé. Wilde's Salomé is driven by carnality or sensuality, even a lack of reason, shown by Salomé's repetition of imperatives as she tries to physically possess Jokanaan:

> **Salomé.**
> I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I will kiss thy mouth.
> **The Young Syrian.**
> [...] Princess, do not speak these things.
> **Salomé.**
> I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.
> (Note: A few lines of dialogue follow here. The Young Syrian cannot bear Salomé's actions and kills himself, falling between Salomé and Jokanaan. The Page of Herodias expresses his guilt over the action. A soldier announces the Syrian's death.)
> **Salomé.**
> Suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.
> **Jokanaan.**

[...H]ath he not come, the angel of death?

Salomé.

Suffer me to kiss thy mouth.

Salomé has no perception of what is happening around her. She focuses solely on kissing Jokanaan's mouth, undeterred even when a man falls to his death at her feet. She goes on to repeat the phrases "I will kiss thy mouth" and "Suffer me to kiss thy mouth" a few more times, determined to get her way, despite the fact that Jokanaan will "suffer" for it.

Bradley and Cooper, in contrast to Wilde, do not make Stephania a femme fatale in her own right, but rather a woman who takes advantage of the seductive, decadent appeal of the temptress ideal to lure and captivate. She is an empress cloaked by a plan, yet "with her slowly insinuating ability to fascinate," she represents a growing temptation the two men in the drama cannot turn away or ignore. But like the soldier in Wilde's *Salomé* who kills himself because he cannot endure her charms, Otho finds himself losing control in the presence of Stephania. About Stephania, Otho says,

This woman summoned up
Such fantasies, such horror, such detail,
Of deeds that I have never done, of thoughts
Strange to me, summoned them as memories,
That all I have to do is now reap
What I have never sown. (I, 684–689)

In her purposeful seduction, Stephania stirs up heterosexual desires in Otho, desires he has never felt or experienced. He loses control of his own body and mind as she "summon[s]" fantasies to erupt from inside him. In a sense, this image resembles a Paterian Aesthete gone beyond "Wilde"; for Otho, it is bad enough that he cannot control his "thoughts," but they are "thoughts strange" — heterosexual thoughts. For this reason, in the all-male artistic communities portrayed by Carlyle and Pater, women were demonized, excluded, othered, and objectified because men could not figure out any other way to control them or their effect. Thus, men believed that if they could not control women or the temptations they caused, their manhood — and consequently their creative and social production — was soon to be lost.

Gerbert must weigh this consequence as he watches Otho sway toward Romuald's lifestyle. To keep Otho from the hermit, Gerbert finally decides to employ rather than reject Stephania's feminine wiles and asks her to "use the famed powers of womanhood" (II, 360–361). But even before Gerbert solicits her aid, Stephania chooses the role of courtesan, knowing full well how the men would see her. In doing so, she regains ownership of womanhood for womanhood by commandeering the power to transform and transcend gender prescriptions. Stephania intentionally decides to become a courtesan after she is raped and left for dead by Otho's soldiers. In the aftermath of their sexual violence, she is at first numbed by the experience, but gradually finds new inspiration and awareness:

> Then sacred grew my agony, my shame,

> Sacred my beauty, sacred the strange arts
> I found myself endowed with, as the child
> Of a great craftsman is endowed with skill
> To handle unfamiliar instruments[.] (I, 74-78)

The "agony" and "shame" she feels because of the demoralizing physical assault becomes "sacred," worthy of religious veneration, holy; the agony and shame become feelings to revere. Her "beauty" and sexuality turn "sacred" as well, as she realizes the "skill" she possesses as a woman. In comparing herself to a "child/Of a great craftsman," she implies that prior to the attack, she was nave in the "craft" of sexuality and likens her body to an "unfamiliar instrument." At the same time, she is "endowed with [the] skill" to use it. She recognizes the power and honors it "with gratitude and awe" (I, 79); she is not "pick[ing] apart the arts" as Barrucand wrote, but sees herself as "craftsman." While the men who raped her, as well as Otho, the man who ordered the rape, subjected her to complete "degradation" (I, 63), Stephania does not remain in that state. She chooses to honor her body by wielding it, by allowing it to "gr[o]w bright in exultation as a shield/ fresh-burnished" (I, 89–91). In a sense, she is a crusader for her own body.

Furthermore, Stephania refers to herself as "courtesan" (I, 4), not prostitute or any other, lower, classification. This pointed label identifies her not of the Roman citizenry or working class, but puts her on another, higher, level, especially for the Victorian reader. Katie Hickman in *Courtesans: Money, Sex, and Fame in the nineteenth-century* offers a new image of the late-nineteenth-

century courtesan as "a powerful symbol of a woman's potential for autonomy, for sexual and emotional self-expression; and a sweet-throated counterblast to the stultifying tyranny of female 'propriety' "(332). Hickman posits that those qualities are exactly the reason why the courtesan is "denied a voice" (331), excluded and othered as I stated earlier. Hickman writes, "Shunned in their own day for being moral degenerates, courtesans were, quite to the contrary, some of the most quick-sighted and astute observers of the moral issues at the heart of women's lot" (334). Stephania demonstrates her "quick-sighted and astute" observations of morality in her critique of the courtesan role. In Act III, near the end of the drama, Stephania rues having to act the part: "O God, how tedious is the harlot's part,/. . . To dress for him,/To garnish infamy" (III, 611, 615–616). A few lines later, she continues her censure of the part: "I clad myself/Thus secretly in grave-clothes every time/That I put on harlot's ornaments" (III, 625–627). Stephania sees herself as a "harlot," an unchaste woman costumed in robes of death, "grave-clothes" that have obviously been worn for Otho, but prescribed by everyman; since she dresses "for him," she is not the "moral degenerate" — he is. In recognizing that she does not shroud herself in this fashion, Stephania not only recognizes Otho and Gerbert — as well as the men who raped her, and men as a whole — as the "moral degenerates," but also recognizes her true self underneath. In the final scene, Stephania declares that the courtesan's "hateful clothes/ Make havoc of [her] beauty" (III, 791–792) and strips them off. This action, as tied to her "beauty," seems to connect back to Paterian aesthetics and marks the disposal

of a "hateful" trope in the Empire of Art. As Stephania endows the courtesan with the autonomy and stature befitting an Empress and, for that matter, a woman, the trope — and power — of the courtesan changes as Stephania physically discards her place as object for subject and other for self.

"And Thrice a Woman's Voice": The Power of the Trialogue

The form of *Stephania* itself plays a vital role in creating some of Stephania's intrinsic power. Certainly some of Michael Field's other dramatic works have a three-act structure similar to that of *Stephania* (mostly those published afterward, including *Attila, My Attila* [1896] and *The Race of Leaves* [1901]), but the fact that Bradley and Cooper classify *Stephania* in its title as "A Trialogue" warrants special notice. The designation seems intentional, reflecting not only its three acts, but also its three-day time span and cast of three. This unification of form, time, and character in a leitmotif of "three" becomes a knot woven from Symbolist tenets which, according to Arthur Symons[33] in his treatise on the French movement, "crystallized" alongside Decadence at the fin de siècle and on into the early twentieth century (Symons 7). Begun in France by Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, the literary movement created works that used symbols to suggest certain associations or connotations, instead of presenting an explicit meaning or message (Bradshaw/Olds 155–157). As the poetics of a text — language, imagery, etc. — seeded "symbolic value," the text itself grew into a symbol (Bradshaw/Olds

[33]A friend of Bradley and Cooper, who supposedly developed romantic feelings toward Cooper; various biographical sources disagree.

157). In this way, the trialogue form could very well symbolize a power struggle between men and women as, historically, the triangle, a shape with three sides and angles, is known to represent both sexes: pointing downward, uterus-fashion, for women; pointing upward, phallic-style, for men. In *Stephania* the trialogue, Stephania the woman emerges on top.

The repetition and symbolism of the "three" leitmotif is key to illuminating Stephania's success. In constructing the drama around three days, Bradley and Cooper provided more weight and urgency to Stephania's character and actions. Richard Patterson explains the significance of the "third day" in his study, "Use of Three in the Bible," and given that *Stephania* is set against the backdrop of the failing Holy Roman Empire, his biblical reading seems apt — and telling — in this context. Throughout the Bible, the "third day," according to Patterson, worked in five suggestive ways: the third day was frequently earmarked to perform a "given activity or matter at hand for some distinct purpose"; to reveal "new information" that would inspire "further activity"; and to serve as the "culmination of a proper time of preparation." The third day was also designated as a "day of healing and spiritual activity" or a "day of resurrection" (Patterson). Bradley and Cooper specifically chose to confine Stephania's mission to three days time, and for her, interestingly enough, the third day represents exactly what Patterson suggests.

In the third act of the drama, which opens as the third day dawns, Stephania's plan to bring down Otho, her "distinct purpose," draws to its "culmination." She has spent three years before the drama, and three days

during, "prepar[ing]" for this moment when she would exact her revenge on Otho. She has seduced him physically and has even convinced Gerbert that the seduction was his idea. In this third act, on this third day, she reveals her duplicity to Gerbert, and the "new information" comes as a surprise. She tells him that he was complicit in her plot:

> You give no signal of dissent, and therefore
> I may affirm unquestioned — narrative
> Is easy where none dares to contradict.
> You eagerly besought me by all arts
> To disenchant the Emperor of the cowl[.] (III, 525–529)

Realizing that he has participated in the impending death of his love, a defeated Gerbert exits the scene without saying anything further and does not return to the drama. At this point, Otho grows more ill, either from the discovery that his mentor betrayed him by collaborating with Stephania, his previous sexual encounter with Stephania (which tore him away from his homosocial path), or a literal, airborne poison made from herbs, which Stephania may or may not have dispersed. Whatever the cause, the third day for Stephania was Otho's deadline, literally and figuratively.

For Stephania, this third day is also a day of "healing" and "resurrection." As the stage directions mark, "[s]he sweeps the coronation mantle around her," symbolizing her resurrection as Empress. Yet not long after she acknowledges that her actions have come to fruition, she "looks at herself in

Otho's shield" and "turns from her reflection with disgust" (III, stage directions). Suddenly, she is drained physically and mentally by the role she had to play: "lethargy falls on [her] like a hell/Pressed inward," and she has "need of sleep" (III, 619–620), a time of renewal. Stephania removes the mantle, her jewelry, and her dress, "beneath which she wears a shroud" (III, stage directions). She regrets her brutal actions and feels as though she has lost her "virtue, [her] reality" (III, 793). But as Otho lay dying, he forgives her, making sure to leave no "poor reproach upon [his] lips" (III, 807). In the final scene, as the sun sets on the third day, Stephania, in casting off her shroud, sheds her courtesan identity, renews her vows to her dead husband, and restores her chastity. Between its connotations of agency and revivification, the three-day construction of *Stephania* makes this closet drama a symbol of a woman's definitive action, or "onward movement," to once again reference Le Gallienne.

David Moriarty identifies *Stephania* as "one of the first examples of a genuine symbolist drama produced in England" (125). But Bradley and Cooper's main purpose of the drama, in his opinion, was to comment on the "symbolic role of the temptress" and to portray the Decadent trope as harmful to women (125). *Stephania* does symbolize the reworking of the temptress/femme fatale/prostitute trope, but also offers this reworking as the symbol for a shift in power dynamics. In other words, by Stephania performing the "symbolic role of the temptress" as part of her plan to tidy up Rome, she tilts the patriarchal/homosocial balance of power in the drama's structural,

erotic triangle. She is not a mere trope created by men, but a woman of virtue and honor who borrowed the role. At the end of the drama, she tells Otho, "I never spoke/The least untruth to you" (III, 688–89). She finally "tears the shroud from her breast and pulls down her hair from the flat folds of her hood," as the stage directions indicate, baring herself as the symbol of a revived and empowered Rome, a revived and empowered womanhood, and a revived and empowered art.

Stephania's symbolic power shines even more brightly when explored through Eve Sedgwick's theory of triangular desire.[34] *In Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick, in addressing theories by René Girard, Lévi-Strauss, Luce Irigary and others, posits that in a triangle of

[34]I have thought about discussing the drama with regard to Shakespeare's sonnets: Sedgwick shows the homosocial power dynamic of the erotic triangle through Shakespeare's sonnets to the Dark Lady and Fair Youth. Without a doubt, *Stephania* plays with the triangular relationship evident in these sonnets and shows Stephania revising Sedgwick's reading of that homosocial power dynamic. As Adrian Poole writes in *Shakespeare and the Victorians*: "The Victorians had Shakespeare in their bones and blood. . . . He was certainly around them, on stage and on posters, in paintings and print and cartoons, in the air they breathed, on the china they ate off. As we listen to them now, his words seem always on the tips of their tongues" (1). Shakespeare was "certainly around" Bradley and Cooper and, in fact, permeated the very "air they breathed," "the china they ate off." Shakespeare's influence went deep for the two women; he represented the literary gold standard. But at the time, even Shakespeare was becoming corrupted by Decadence as a "potent strait of deviance — especially in his sonnets" because of the adulterous and homosexual themes (Williams 65). Although many Victorian authors clung to Shakespeare in order to revive a sense of "literary decorum and national identity," as Rhian E. Williams states in "Michael Field's Shakespearean Community," the sonnets were also being adopted by the homosexual community as advocating same-sex desire (65). Though Bradley and Cooper had what some deem a sexual and incestuous relationship, their pride in a "literary decorum and national identity" leads me to theorize that in *Stephania* they were playing right into the "strait of deviance" in order to comment on it. Much of Field's canon — poetic and dramatic — rings with Shakespearean influence.

two men who desire the same woman, the women is frequently positioned as a locus of commutation, trade, barter, even honor between men.[35] The desire between the male rivals grows stronger than the desire either man has for the woman, and through this desire, the men "exchange power" and "confirm each other's value," leaving the "pitiable and contemptible" woman as a mere pawn in, or even out of the equation (*Between* 160). In other words, the woman acts only as a conduit for male-male desire, and this asymmetrical triangle becomes a symbol of patriarchal, homosocial supremacy. This theory gains new meaning in examining the triangular relationship formally constructed in *Stephania*. Stephania, purposefully playing the role of the "pitiable and contemptible" woman, prevents Otho and Gerbert from "exchang[ing]" any sort of power and from "confirm[ing] each other's value." Stephania is not simply the mediator of male desire, even though Gerbert clearly loves Otho. She harnesses their illicit desires, uses them, and destroys them in favor of fulfilling her own desires. When Gerbert admits to her that Otho is close to being "sucked up by the fiend" Romuald (II, 198), Stephania decides to use his affection for Otho to her advantage. At first, she kneels to Gerbert in deference:

> Consent
> To let me be your leech, and, while you mock
> And disregard me, you will feel your powers
> Press to expansion as the buds in spring. (II, 192–195)

[35] I have compressed ideas here that were sprinkled throughout Sedgwick's text.

As the "pitiable and contemptible" woman, even "leech," she tempts him with the figurative and physical; certainly his "powers" to influence Otho will "press to expansion" if Stephania were to draw Otho back to Gerbert's side, but the connotations of an erection – and of mental Viagra as well – are unmistakable. Stephania offers a "reinforced brilliance and relief" for Gerbert, to touch back on Pater, something the cloistered Gerbert cannot refuse. In the end of *Stephania*, the desires of a harlot are revealed to be the desires of a noble woman and a widow, and these desires, not the desires of Otho or Gerbert, crown the triangular structure of empire, glory, and honor. Stephania dominates the triangle and gets the final word.

A Monument to "Desire Fulfilled": Conclusion

In Act One, Stephania asks Otho to remember that she is more than his "handmaid" (I, 644); she is

> no ghost, [but] a creature of warm blood,
> Banished all lovely offices of life,
> Having no tears to shed, with no regrets,
> Remaining merely as a monument
> Contending hosts have clashed against, that stands
> Erect amid the carnage of the plains. (I, 650–656)

In this verse, the monument shows Stephania as a human being denigrated like an inanimate object, stripped of her life, left numb, made a symbol of war. She is "merely" the monument to "carnage" and events past, "a site of nothingness" or "the gap left by the husband" perhaps, as Dagni Ann Bredesen marks

the popular portrayal of Victorian widowhood(7). Bredesen, in her study *Categorical Exceptions: Widows, Sexuality, and Fictions of (Dis)Coverture in Victorian Domestic and Imperial Narratives*, poses an interesting question relevant to the analysis and themes of *Stephania* discussed in this chapter: "How can a married woman — virtually dead in the eyes of the law — come back to 'life,' so to speak, on her husband's death?" (65). Bradley and Cooper use the closet drama genre not only to resurrect a widow who "ceased to be/[her]self" after her rape (I, 566–67), but also to show that empowerment as a challenge to the male homosocial supremacy and desire. In the end, the story of Stephania's triumph becomes a different sort of monument than the image offered at the start of the drama.

Specifically, in the last verses of the drama, Stephania vows to have herself and her husband Crescentius

> sculptured on a monument
> Together, side by side, and hand in hand,
> As any mortal pair that had their part
> Of joy and sorrow and then sank in death —
> The wife, the husband! (III, 829–833)

The image of the monument, with its artistic and historic connotations, is an important one on which to close *Stephania*. Though the monument officially and permanently memorializes "the wife, the husband," that "mortal pair" also "sank in death." Stephania has "cleansed" (III, 821) her reputation as Crescentius' wife, but in the final lines of the drama, she sits alone,

contemplating "the great triumph [she has] won," first "for Italy," then "[her] womanhood," and lastly, her husband. Crescentius, though celebrated on the monument to come, is now the "site of nothingness" — he has no actual tomb (III, 833). In this way, the monument becomes a bold annunciation erected by a woman and symbolizes a challenge to those doors and empires closed by men and limited to male desires. Furthermore, Stephania, as a "cleansed" woman with her love "made so whole" (III, 821) that she "can turn the wicked into hell/as unperturbed as God" (III, 822–823), a woman whose eradication of those "who trample[d] and pollute[d]" (III, 818) the Roman Empire has restored her purity, a wife who remains pure in her status as widow, is herself a monument. She symbolizes womanhood's reclamation of the fallen, immoral Roman empire, and in the same vein, womanhood's reclamation of the fallen, immoral, decadent empire of Art. The battle for control over physical desires is won.

With this lasting image, Bradley and Cooper, in their devotion to the principles of Aestheticism and their struggle for equality as women writers, sent a clear message to their readership about their personal covenant regarding Art. Certainly, Bradley and Cooper did not set out to offend a coterie which they admired, as shown by this quotation from Bradley to Robert Browning early in their career as Field: "It is not in our power or desire to treat irreverently customs or beliefs that have been, or are, sacred to men" (*Works* 8). But in Bradley and Cooper's rigid interpretation of the Paterian aesthetic — specifically, pleasure brought to the brink but deftly controlled, the physical

manifested through written expression or material decoration,[36] earthly passions made divine through language — and their dismissal of anything that strayed from or, more importantly, tainted that philosophy, the two women undoubtedly saw corporeal desires (in effect, both homosexual and heterosexual) as the cause of the decline in what they viewed as true Art. It appears that they were not trying to offend men per se, just as they promised Browning, but did so in their all-encompassing condemnation of uncontrollable physical passion. This point is ironic in light of what some scholars identify as a physical relationship between Bradley and Cooper, as supported by explicitly ardent entries in their correspondence and shared journals. In my opinion, however, the language in those archival materials, as well as the rhetoric of *Stephania*, only definitively indicates that Bradley and Cooper lived for, and valued above all else, the written expression of ecstasy, and that pursuit led to their professional demise.[37] In a time when homosexual acts, private or public, were illegal, *Stephania*, with its female protagonist using her "feminine wiles" to destroy the relationship between two men, and its two female authors condemning those who acted on physical desire, indeed made "something" of "manhood" fall.

[36]Bradley and Cooper's dedication to Art could also be seen in their flamboyant manner of dress and home décor. See Donoghue.

[37]Throughout the correspondence between Bradley and Cooper, there are too many instances to count of both women trying to control their wayward passions for each other, with and without success. Most times, they express anguish, guilt, or regret for these feelings and suggest this emotion is getting in the way of their creativity. I am intrigued by this conclusion and am eager to further investigate archival materials.

Chapter 4

"I Could Be Tempted": The Ev(e)olution of the Angel in the House in *A Woman Sold*

Eleanor.
Lionel, I know
I could be happier so — with you — I know,
Than in the tempting paradise Sir Joyce
Has won my parents with — and almost me.
Ah! love, I have been weak. You were away.
And I was flattered. And I had gone far
Before I knew where I was being led.
(*A Woman Sold*, I, 310–316)

As did many of the works in her cross-genre career, Augusta Webster's two-act closet drama, *A Woman Sold* (1867), thematically addressed the popular mid-nineteenth-century attitude of the English middle class regarding what they viewed as the sinful implications of choosing a mercenary marriage over a marriage born of love.[1] In *A Woman Sold*, Webster situates female

[1]By "mercenary marriage" here, I refer to a union initiated by the promise of a financially stable future and by "love," I refer to what Wendy S. Jones calls a "virtuous passion" as

protagonist Eleanor Vaughan at the crossroads of committing this marital sin. Eleanor must choose between marrying the wealthy, older gentleman Sir Joyce Boycott — a match she is pressured by her friends and family into accepting — or her middle class suitor Lionel, a fledging lawyer. Throughout the entire first act of the drama, Eleanor and Lionel argue over her decision to sacrifice their love for a mercenary marriage. Lionel accuses Eleanor of allowing herself to be sold by her parents for jewels, social status, and property and warns that she will lose her piety, innocence, and virtue if she goes through with what he considers an unholy business deal. In the second act of the drama, set six years later, Eleanor — now named Lady Boycott to indicate her new status since she did indeed marry Sir Joyce off-page — is mourning her husband's recent death, grieving over her lost love for Lionel, and is devastated to discover her best friend Mary is betrothed to Lionel and will live the life Eleanor once desired.

For the mid-nineteenth-century reader, the message of the drama may have seemed simple: a woman is tempted to turn her back on love by the seductive promise of "wealth and rank" (I, 304) — a temptation that also seduces her family — and surrendering to this temptation leads her into an unhappy future filled with eternal regret, personal loss, and exile from domestic paradise. The drama's language and imagery stray from realism by subtly evoking the familiar allegorical metanarrative of Eve's experience with the

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opposed to an uncontrollable desire, as was popular in nineteenth-century thought (Jones 6).

serpent in the garden of Eden, as exemplified by the quotation that opens this chapter, and thus lends moral weight to Eleanor's choice: a spiritually "weak" Eleanor (along with her parents) is "led," lured, far away from "love" by the material power promised in Sir Joyce's "tempting paradise."[2] Though Eve is seduced in Genesis by the idea of wisdom and Eleanor in *A Woman Sold* by the idea of a secure upper class future, *A Woman Sold* conflates the choices of the two women into a moral lesson about how disregarding the divine laws of marriage and falling into temptation can lead to exile from certain contentment in Paradise and to lifelong atonement for that sin. In this chapter, I want to argue that Webster creates in her drama a synergy of narrative, genre, and form to revise that lesson and to critique the institution of marriage itself.

Though *A Woman Sold* might, at first read, seem like a simple parable instructing its readers about the importance of marrying for love, I want to reveal how, upon close examination, the drama instead predicts the way in which Webster will later lean on irony as a favorite rhetorical device to deliver sociopolitical commentary throughout what will be a prolific cross-genre career. Twelve years after Webster wrote *A Woman Sold*, she published *A Housewife's Opinions* (1879), a collection of previously printed essays that range in subject from an analysis of Greek translation to the "Protection for the Working Woman," and challenged certain patriarchal and misogynist ideas

[2]Regarding the story of Genesis, I refer to the King James version of the Holy Bible, Oxford Text Archive, 1995, made available through the University of Virginia Library: http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=KjvGene.sgm&images=images /modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=teiHeader.

about women's roles and interests. Though written some time after *A Woman Sold*, these unconventional "housewife's" opinions show her purposeful employment of rhetorical irony as the self-proclaimed mid-nineteenth-century housewife of the volume's title demonstrates her political and intellectual knowledge and critiques social and cultural attitudes. The intentional construction of *A Housewife's Opinions* presents Webster as a writer who knew the power of rhetorical form and function, particularly in gathering essays published separately and anonymously in the *Examiner* and promoting them through the voice of a middle class housewife; through this collection, Webster showed the housewife as well-read, socially conscious, and politically savvy, and used form and genre to show that the change legislated in large halls or even Parliament could begin right with her. In this chapter, I want to show that the construction of *A Woman Sold* provides an early example of Webster's attention to formal rhetoric, as her use of the closet drama acts as a structural metaphor for the sociomythological confinement of the nineteenth-century middle class woman.

In detail, I want to explain how Webster uses irony in the narrative, genre, and form of *A Woman Sold* to expose incongruity in the literal message of the text: by layering a marriage plot with an allegorical metanarrative that relates Eve's "original sin" to the popular image of Coventry Patmore's "angel in the house" and choosing to frame the story inside the closet drama genre, Webster identifies the institution of middle class marriage in the mid-nineteenth-century not as the site of potential Paradise for women to dutifully

nurture and maintain behind an idyllic "little rose-covered wall," an image of home life that social critic John Ruskin presented in *Sesames and Lilies*, his widely read treatise on the inherent responsibilities of men and women published two years before *A Woman Sold* in 1865. Rather, Webster depicts the institution of marriage as a bound, restrictive space where society dictates that the identity, choices, and actions of the nineteenth-century middle class woman must be projected in an angelic, virtuous form to make amends for Eve's original sin. Though Marilyn Yalom in *A History of the Wife* (2002) negates this idea by claiming, "No longer the daughters of Eve associated with man's undoing, Victorian wives and daughters were elevated to the position of spiritual guides" (182), I believe *A Woman Sold* suggests that Victorian women were in fact "elevated to the positions of spiritual guides" because they *were* seen as daughters of Eve, that these "spiritual guides" or "angels in the house" were created to keep women from having to make choices which, as in the Genesis story, could have an adverse effect on the future of "mankind" at large. In its allegory, *A Woman Sold* illustrates how the social and cultural interpretation of Eve's story transformed marriage in the mid-nineteenth-century into a dead-end choice that would restrict women's personal and social growth, independence, and knowledge. I want to illustrate, then, how the construction of *A Woman Sold* presents the idea that marriage for nineteenth-century middle class women was a closet of social and cultural paralysis, built on a history of sociomythologically-limited gender expectations.

I will base my discussion of the term "closet" on the etymology of the

word as provided in my introduction. For my specific use in this chapter, I have pared down the definitions for clarity, eliminating certain redundancy:

- In later Fr. applied exclusively to a small enclosure in the open air.
- A room for privacy or retirement; a private room; an inner chamber; the place of private study or secluded speculation.
- A private repository of valuables or (esp. in later use) curiosities; a private or concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view; to come out of the closet: to admit (something) openly, to cease to conceal.

With this set of definitions in mind, I speak of the "closet" as a private space, a "private trouble," the word "private" reflective of the following explanations: "restricted to one person or a few persons as opposed to the wider community; of a conversation, communication, etc.: intended for or confined to the person or persons directly concerned; confidential; kept or removed from public view of knowledge; secret; concealed" (OED). I also invoke Sedgwick's theories from *Epistemology of the Closet* to highlight these points; however, I use Sedgwick here not in the context of homosexuality per se, but rather a more basic level of mobility and agency in a particular space.[3] Although the closet takes on

[3]As I mentioned in my introduction, while I see ample possibilities for discussing *A Woman Sold* and the other closet dramas in this dissertation through the complex discourse of homosexuality Sedgwick offers in *Epistemology of the Closet*, I consider the level of argument in this chapter an essential step in preparing the groundwork for those future

many manifestations in *A Woman Sold*, from the metaphors suggested by the drama's genre and subject matter to the physical location where Eleanor/Lady Boycott dialogues with Lionel and Mary, each manifestation projects a similar meaning of confinement and restriction, yet ironically blurs the lines between private and public, or the "wider community," as the issues discussed and decisions made inside the closet represent individual as well as social anxieties.

At the same time, I also want to direct attention in this chapter to the ways in which Webster's ironic interplay of narrative, genre, and form points the way toward female agency growing outside those closets represented in *A Woman Sold*. In positioning Eleanor's marital choice in the first act as the only choice she has for her future, Webster cast her female protagonist as the mid-nineteenth-century middle class daughter, inheritor, and redeemer of Eve, faced with a decision that not only will determine her own moral worth and her future, but will affect the moral worth and future of other women of her time. But at the end of the drama, Webster's tightly-knit unification of narrative, genre, and form supports a reading in which her female protagonist's "sin" of choosing a mercenary marriage over love only leads to temporary exile, as Lady Boycott's punitive sentence ends when her husband dies and she is left independent and financially secure. As the second act comes to a close, Webster shows Lady Boycott moving toward taking possession of her voice, her reason, her virtue, and her identity in imagining her future involved with a triangular

queries. I do not, by any means, intend to "de-homosexualize" Sedgwick's theories, but rather, in this limited space, hope to show their relevance and their requirement in future study.

friendship with both her best friend Mary and her former suitor Lionel (now Mary's fiancé), rather than entertaining the idea of another marriage, continuing a life of widowed solitude, or even looking toward death, all popular finales for nineteenth-century women in literature. I posit that Webster transforms the closet, and the closet drama genre, from a male-defined space into a site that invites for the mid-nineteenth-century middle class woman possibilities beyond the patriarchal myths and prescriptions which bind her, especially to the institution of marriage; Webster does this by choosing to write the story of a woman's impossible choice as a closet drama — to recap, a genre traditionally written by men that tends to focus on the psychological exploration of a male protagonist — layering that story with an allegorical metanarrative that critiques the sociomythologies of both Eve and the angel in the house, and structuring the drama as two acts that signpost the female protagonist's life "Before" and "After" she chooses a husband.

My argument in this chapter contributes to the work on *A Woman Sold* initiated by Susan Brown, one of the few scholars to study this drama. In her article, "Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women," Brown aims to draw attention to the way a particular trend of Victorian closet drama by women (exemplified in Brown's article by Eliot's *Armgart* and Webster's *A Woman Sold*) directly dialogues with contemporary social issues and consequently diverges from traditional closet drama topics. She focuses on the "determined heroines" of Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* and *Armgart*, specifically on how the closet drama form helps

"to inscribe women as subjects and actors, and to demystify the historically specific constraints to which they were subject" (104). She suggests that these closet dramas and others like them, in contrast to those characteristic of the Romantic "mental theater," show women recognizing, struggling against, and acting on the various external forces that contributed to the construction of their social identity (105). Brown posits that the women in these dramas reflect the social complexity of their gender roles, "at once heroically and socially constrained" (106). In terms of Webster's *A Woman Sold*, Brown discusses how the social institutions of marriage and family constrain Eleanor's desire, and only when she gets the opportunity to slip outside of them is she rewarded with a "fluidity of identity" that can escape "limiting and totalizing social judgments" (101).

I agree with Brown's main arguments and support the idea that the closet drama form of *A Woman Sold* (along with Eliot's *Armgart*) allows for "an exploration of social questions" and resists "simplistic reduction" (103). But I believe Brown's acknowledgement of the social engagement of *A Woman Sold*, though important in the re-introduction and recovery of Webster's work, needs fleshing out to fully illustrate how *A Woman Sold* resists a "simplistic reduction." For example, while Brown declares that the "status of the fallen woman is also at issue" in *A Woman Sold* and that the drama "works to deny the notion of female essence or of an opposition to 'pure' and 'fallen' natures" (97), she doesn't make any direct connection between the fallen woman/Eve influence on Eleanor/Lady Boycott or the form of the drama. Brown does suc-

ceed in analyzing the language of the narrative but fails to fully explore what she calls *A Woman Sold*'s subjective, "dialogized," "dramatic form" to support her points (102). Thus I proceed further along Brown's track by demonstrating how Webster, in tying a contemporary narrative to allegorical stakes and containing it within a revised closet drama framework, allowed *A Woman Sold* to critique the biblical mythology that created for the mid-nineteenth-century woman a literal and figurative closet in which the institution of marriage, as well as gender prescriptions, rendered her inert and voiceless.

Furthermore, I want to address the claim that Webster has a "critical and not a myth-making voice," an idea advanced by Angela Leighton in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (173). Through my analysis of *A Woman Sold*, I want to show that, by recasting the traditional gender role-play of the Victorian woman, Webster's revision of the closet drama genre added to the conversation of nineteenth-century women writers who were reimagining the mythology of Eve and introducing new interpretations into social consciousness (Taylor/Weir 205). Many nineteenth-century women writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Elizabeth Strutt could not identify with, and thus amended, the biblical and Miltonic portrayals of Eve that were widely accepted.[4] As Marion Ann Taylor and Heather Weir write

[4]Valerie Sanders in *Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists* notes that mid-nineteenth-century writer Elizabeth Strutt believed that the sexes were equal since Adam and Eve came from the same place of origin, but still adhered to the idea that men and women had inherent differences in their manners (164). In the early nineteenth-century, author Hannah Mather Crocker also saw in the story of Genesis the equality between men and women, yet promoted the idea that women became subordinate beings after the

in *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-century Women Writing on Women in Genesis*, nineteenth-century women writers perceived Eve in a multitude of ways, from "the crown of creation to Eve as the victim of power; from a woman to be pitied to a woman to be praised" (24). But Taylor and Weir posit that most women writers of the period did not radically oppose the patriarchal interpretation of the Bible, but instead offered their own retellings which gave new depth to the character development of Eve. In the myth and characterization of Eve, as Taylor and Weir argue, nineteenth-century women writers discovered "self-understanding, self-knowledge, guidance, and direction" (104) and in their interpretation of the traditional mythology challenged conventional readings, even when they did adhere to certain biblical and Miltonic

fall (Taylor, Weir 25). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton fleshes out the ribs of the original story recorded in Genesis 2-3, which offers the account in a scant 49 lines or so, or two brief chapters. Whereas the biblical telling eschews any form of character development, Milton creates characters who cultivate certain gender roles and prescriptions for centuries to follow. Milton's Eve is, at first, blissful in both her innocence and her ignorance and is happily guided by Adam's reason (Milton IV). The biblical description of Eve and her actions is much more spare, leaving room for interpretation. Many nineteenth-century women writers, as Gilbert and Gubar note, could not connect with either of these portrayals and offered their commentary on, and adaptation of, the history through their own works. Gilbert and Gubar mention some of these "revisionary" texts, including Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, as well as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's closet drama, *A Drama of Exile* (189). Like Webster, Barrett Browning set her drama, modeled after Greek tragedy, following Adam and Eve's exile from Paradise. The work focuses on Eve as she deals with the guilt and consequences of her sinful deed; however, Barrett Browning uses the drama to question the conventional gender roles and attitudes constructed by the patriarchal myth.Ultimately, Eve comes to appreciate her mortality and the physical "punishments" she received as a result of her "fall." As Terence Allan Hoagwood suggests in "Biblical Criticism and Secular Sex: Elizabeth Barrett's *A Drama of Exile* and Jean Ingelow's *A Story of Doom*," Eve relinquishes "the abstract eternity of patristic exegesis" to embrace "a bodily love of mother earth" (167). She learns the love of motherhood and is honored by Adam as "Mother of the world" (*Exile* 1824) and learns to "[l]isten down the heart of things" (*Exile* 2068) for answers, rather than to look up to Heaven for guidance (Hoagwood 167).

ideas.

Through the irony created by the textual construction of *A Woman Sold*, Webster joins her peers in offering a mid-nineteenth-century Ev(e)olution: a daughter of Eve commits, and pays for, the social sin of choosing mercenary marriage over love, but is redeemed, not through her duty as angel in the house, but by the personal awareness that comes with the death of her husband. In this chapter, by exposing several strata of a complex drama that recognizes and revises women's mythological history in order to imagine a new one, I hope to truly keep *A Woman Sold* from "simplistic reduction." In fact, I hope a more thorough analysis of the sociomythological connections evoked by the genre, form, and narrative of *A Woman Sold* will inspire a new examination of how Webster works rhetorically with genre and form throughout her canon.[5]

My analysis in this chapter is separated into two main sections. In the first section, I will position the rhetorical irony of *A Woman Sold* by framing the drama as a critique of specific ideas in John Ruskin's *Sesames and Lilies* and Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, works that popularized the mid-nineteenth-century middle class ideology regarding gender roles and the institution of marriage, especially with regard to their moral imperatives for women. In the second section, I will show how Webster's employment and

[5]Scholarship has focused on Augusta Webster's poetry and includes: an overview of Webster's poetic canon in Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*; Christine Sutphin's edited collection of *Portraits and Other Poems* and her article "The Representation of Women's Heterosexual Desire in Augusta Webster's 'Circe' and 'Medea' in Athens"; and Marysa Demoor's "Power in Petticoats: Augusta Webster's Poetry, Political Pamphlets, and Poetry Reviews."

adaptation of the closet drama genre acknowledges and calls for a revision of popular ideologies: essentially, the narrative, genre, and form of *A Woman Sold* work together not only to recognize the institution of marriage as a figurative closet that constrained the life possibilities of the unmarried Victorian woman of the middle class, but also to remodel that closet into a space where a woman could choose to reject the subordinate and submissive gender roles assigned to her. With this chapter, I will conclude that *A Woman Sold* radically reveals the "angel in the house" as the "angel in the closet," a direct descendant of Eve in her closet Paradise, yet leaves the closet door open for the reclamation of female agency and a new sort of female redemption.

"Was not Eve Born a Bride": Critiquing the Nineteenth-Century Institution of Marriage

At the time of *A Woman Sold*'s publication in 1867, due to the technological advancements and employment opportunity resulting from the Industrial Revolution which pitched across the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the English middle class was rising in status and attempting to displace the aristocracy in their social and political control.[6]

[6]For more in-depth study on the social and religious attitudes of the rising middle class: Gerald Parsons et al, *Religion in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Claudia Nelson, *Family Ties in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007); Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-century England* (London: Routledge, 1989); Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004); Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Wendy Jones, *Consensual Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). My discussion in this paragraph was synthesized from the information provided throughout these texts.

Even as it reached for material success and social power, the middle class assigned itself the protector of moral authority, denouncing what it considered the self-indulgence and wasteful excess of the upper class by championing the Protestant work ethic (pointedly, hard work and success equate to salvation) as well as evangelical Christian doctrine. In a time when moral beliefs were in danger of becoming deprioritized in the avid pursuit of capitalism and dismissed in the favor of scientific discovery, many in the middle class saw their ethical fight as essential to the future of England. The institution of marriage, and the home created by that marriage, became the site of repentance not only for what the middle class saw as its growing social sins, but also for the "original sin" committed in the "first marriage" between Adam and Eve, which had resulted in Paradise lost. For the majority of the middle class, upholding the sanctity of marriage — a sacrament between two people and the manifestation of God's will — was a crucial part of restoring Paradise on Earth and, consequently, of supporting English nationalism; essentially, a society built on the model of love and domestic duty portrayed in Genesis, a story about mankind's creation and womankind's sin, was certain to fuel England with Godly strength. Therefore, according to this middle class ideology, entering into a marriage that equated to little more than a financial transaction, rather than a moral, spiritual, and physical pledge, committed the ultimate sin against both God and country.

As noted earlier in this chapter, John Ruskin in his bestseller *Sesame and Lilies*, published in 1865 two years before *A Woman Sold*, discussed the

concept of marriage as a social and national covenant and described how husband and wife played different roles in fulfilling their commitment to the marriage and to England.[7] The notion of separate spheres for men and women based on their natural attributes was one that would identify the century, and while a husband was responsible for defending home and country against the vagabonds of violence and vice, his wife, according to Ruskin's treatise, was cast as "the centre of order, the balm of distress, and the mirror of beauty," both "within her gates" and "without her gates" (138). In other words, though a husband defended the boundaries of home and nation, a wife's social responsibility was to nurture and maintain the edenic, peaceful world inside the boundaries of home, as well as to use the skills inside the home to lessen and heal the "agony of men" beyond what Ruskin called her — as previously illustrated — "little rose-covered wall" (143). Furthermore, a wife, in Ruskin's popular opinion, had to cultivate her domestic paradise by being "enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise — wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side" (122). Essentially, a woman's power came from her role as a man's moral guide and pious helpmeet, privately and publicly. Therefore, since marriage was the mark of "eternal love," as Ruskin proclaimed, and a wife was expected to express that

[7]Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* is a transcript of lectures he delivered in 1864: "Of King's Treasuries" and "Of Queen's Gardens." The book, according to the 2002 reprint edited by Deborah Epstein Nord, was a "common gift for girls and a fixture in middle class homes" (Ruskin xiv).

"love" through her virtuous caretaking, a woman who succumbed to a loveless marriage for the sake of status or wealth demonstrated a divine disobedience and a moral corruption that would lead to the downfall of home, society, and nation (Ruskin 117, 120).[8]

Ruskin's view of gender and marriage in *Sesame and Lilies* was greatly influenced by another widely read work about gender and marriage, Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, a long narrative lyric comprised of four different volumes serialized between 1854 and 1862. The poem celebrated the institution of marriage and identified woman as a paragon of virtue with the moral power to rise above Eve's "fall," prompting the term "angel in the house" to become a moniker that would historically symbolize ideal Victorian womanhood.[9] As the speaker, a poet named Vaughan, extols the marvel that is first his beloved, then his fiancée, and finally his wife, he offers her as a representative of what Everywoman should be — an angel, a queen. Patmore's theme caught on with the public and was the subject of critical and literary writings. For example, a five-part series called "The Daughters of Eve" (1861), published in *Temple Bar*, a London "town and country" magazine, chronicled the lives of seven famous women whom the anonymous writer believed to

[8] I am simplifying Ruskin's argument about women's roles quite a bit here. See "Victoria and Ruskin's Domestic Mythology" by Sharon Aronofsky Williams in *Remaking Queen Victoria*, ed. Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich, particularly the argument beginning on page 105, for a more comprehensive reading of the connections Ruskin makes in "Of Queen's Gardens" between Queen Victoria and the Angel.

[9] *The Angel in the House* includes a verse entitled "The Daughter of Eve," in which the speaker states that he accepts woman's flaws, "faults," and "errors" because underneath all of those, she is a gentle woman.

epitomize Eve as she was created. In part five, "Louise Emilie Beauharnais, Comtesse de Lavalette," the writer's definition of a "true daughter of Eve" resembles Patmore's married angel in the house:

> [I]t is clear that no woman can claim to be a true daughter of Eve but on the condition that she has taken upon herself the solemn joys and hallowed cares of wifedom; for was not Eve born a bride, wreathed in the ineffable splendour of her beauty as the fountain of all female loveliness to the end of this world's time, veiled in the mystic reserve of her native modesty and purity as the womanliest of women[.] (417)

Like the speaker of Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, the author of "Louise Emilie Beauharnais" describes contemporary woman in the state of Eve before the Fall, "born a bride" in her "native modesty and purity," ready to experience "the solemn joys and hallowed cares of wifedom." This language echoes the way Patmore's angel in the house also seems to be made in Eve's image, as depicted in a section of the poem called "The Rose of the World," which tells the story of God who "form'd the woman" (7) with a "countenance angelical" (12), such power in her beauty to bring the faithless the hope of heaven, and modesty, "her chiefest grace" (25).

Though some nineteenth-century critics did chafe against the portrayal of women in Patmore's poem, *The Angel in the House* would earn Patmore

the long-standing title of "consecrated laureate of wedded love."[10] The poem's theme is summarized in Book One of *The Angel in the House*, in a verse called "Love Justified"; Vaughan declares, "This little germ of nuptial love,/Which springs so simply from the sod,/The root is, as my Song shall prove,/Of all our love to man and God" (Patmore 41–44). Through Patmore, the poet's "Song," about "nuptial love" from which a root grows and is "love to man and God," became, as proclaimed by an anonymous essay in an issue of *Macmillan's* that appeared in the autumn of 1863, the "song of songs, wherein is glorified the the pure passion, which, if it is to be found anywhere in the world, is to be found at our English firesides — conjugal love" (*Macmillan's* 256). The domestic image of marriage based on mutual love as an anthem to be sung at English "firesides," or hearths, assigned woman as the heavenly guardian of the marriage flame that kept England strong, and subsequently faulted her for dousing that flame by being tempted to marry for any reason but love, and especially eschewing love for money. Patmore illustrates how marrying for money negatively impacts an edenic domestic future in a section of *The Angel in the House* called "Aetna and the Moon" when a woman "on her sweet self set her own price" (58):

> How has she cheapen'd paradise;
> How given for nought her priceless gift,

[10]Many of the ideas of those who criticized Patmore's feminine ideal would grow into the philosophy of the New Woman. In contrast, critic Edmund Gosse would give the name "consecrated laureate" to Patmore in his 1905 biography.

How spoil'd the bread and spill'd the wine,
Which, spent with due, respective thrift,
Had made brutes men, and men divine. (60–64)

By pricing herself as free goods, this woman "cheapen'd paradise," wasting physical and spiritual nourishment by "spoil[ing]" the bread and "spill[ing]" the wine. Furthermore, her action turned men into "brutes," beasts. This verse implies that a woman who was instead "thrift[y]" with her self as "gift," had the power to turn beasts into men and make "men divine," and was thus granted the power to lead men unto salvation. The allusion to Eve is obvious, as the woman "cheapen'd paradise" by freely giving away her "priceless gift": the innocence imbued in her by God. By giving away this gift, she made Adam a "brute" by association and severed, sold, their "divine" connection.

As the mythology of *The Angel in the House* was socioculturally grafted atop the mythology of Eve, Augusta Webster began her writing career under the name of Cecil Home and like other writers seemed to be inspired by popular ideology and traditional poetic form. Several poems in her first collection, *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems* (1860), address the personal misery that befalls those who do not embrace, secure, or, most importantly, marry for love. In the ballad "Edith," a young woman encourages her suitor to instead marry a wealthy woman, even though the marriage would be loveless. Her suitor reluctantly agrees, and, in the end, on his wedding day, Edith hopes the marriage bells will soon turn into a death-knell for her, emphasized by the phrases Edith repeats throughout the poem, "Oh! well that a maiden should be proud!/And

my wedding robe will be a shroud." In another ballad, "Cruel Agnes," a man falls in love with a beautiful woman who declares that "she could not be a poor man's bride" and demands he "raise his fortunes to her height," but when he succeeds in obtaining riches, she demands he achieve glory for his name on the battlefield. He dies trying to gain her love, and she marries, "sold, to be a noble's wife,/To an old baron her young life." The woman goes on to live a horrible life in "woe and strife" with an authoritarian husband and dies, to her "tyrant lord" husband's satisfaction, regretting her lost chance at true love. The common strains of love sacrificed and loveless marriages also reside in the narrative poem *Lilian Gray* (1864) and Webster's only novel *Lesley's Guardians* (1864); throughout these works, the female protagonists find unhappy ends as a result of either somehow turning their backs on love and the marriage that could be born from that love or being forced into marriage out of social expectation or familial necessity.

For the first collection of poetry published under her own name, *Dramatic Studies* (1866), Webster turned to the dramatic monologue and away from the marriage theme in the poem "By the Looking-Glass." Webster does, however, critique the expectations of the angel in the house and presents the speaker, a young woman, lamenting the fact that she does not fit the angel in the house criteria — in her words she is a "common," "clumsy creature" never given "the angel's wings" — and consequently has never experienced love or marriage. The speaker of the poem declares that people do not know the "poisonful sting" or "the sense of shame" she feels because she is not beautiful, nor

do they realize the way her "plain" appearance dictates her "woman's lot"; her successful future as a woman — courtship, love, marriage, motherhood — depends on her looks.

The poetic form with which Webster framed the sociocommentary of "By the Looking-Glass" hints at the choice of genre Webster would choose in addressing the subject matter of *A Woman Sold*. "By the Looking-Glass" is a monologue that can be considered both dramatic and interior: a dramatic monologue marks engagement between a speaker and a silent listener who may or may not be acknowledged through the speaker's words while an interior monologue marks thoughts "heard" only by the "speaker." The speaker of "By the Looking Glass" leaves a ball to sit alone in the sanctuary of her room; she classifies herself and her worth in the "pitiless mirror" she faces nightly, the mirror acting as a metaphor for the eyes of society that evaluate and judge her outside her room. She is aware that society, not her self, creates her reflection and inspires self-loathing, but she sees no means of escape.[11] Thus, in a poem that can at once be both dramatic (having a possible audience) and interior (representing a moment of solitary rumination), Webster shows that the female speaker longs for but does not have, in her womanhood, a private space to call her own, even when she is contemplating her self alone in her room. At the end of the poem, the speaker wants to sleep her "wild thoughts" away and sees freedom only in the "peace of night." The popular poetic metaphor of sleep

[11]My reading coincides with Angela Leighton's reading of the poem in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* 186–187.

as death predicts the speaker's bleak future, potentially her only option since she cannot fulfill the role society has assigned.

At the time *Dramatic Studies* was published, Webster was helping to generate opportunities for women that would allow them to grow beyond their socially prescribed roles (Sutphin 11). With the support of her husband Thomas who quit a law career and a lectureship so they could explore her interests in London (Sutphin 11), Webster spoke out for women's causes, joining the women's suffrage movement and being elected to the London School Board where she advocated for more opportunities in women's education (Leighton 166). Webster believed if women had a solid education, they could support themselves, thus eradicating the "aimlessness and drifting and fussy futility"[12] of their prescribed angelic lives and giving their existence meaning (Leighton 170–171). Although Webster did in fact revere married love, as evidenced in her later essays, she touted education as a vital option particularly for those women who could not marry for love: "[T]he ability to earn her livelihood [...] might save a girl from ruining her self-respect and her happiness by a mercenary marriage" (Sutphin 392). Webster viewed education as a way for women to get out from under the physical and financial control of men, a position socially and politically configured by legislation written by men. Efforts of Webster and the other women who championed equal educational opportunities for girls and young women led to The Education Act of 1870, which made primary education mandatory for both sexes, as well as the creation of the

[12]From Webster's collection of essays, *A Housewife's Opinions*(1879), 96.

Girls' Public Day School Trust in 1872, which allowed many girls to pursue secondary education (Leighton 170). However, even with these legal improvements, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge wouldn't give women degrees until the early twentieth century, an issue Webster lobbied for decades by supporting women's right to vote (Leighton 170). In 1878, Webster wrote a piece for *The Examiner* in which she demanded that all women should have the right to vote, keeping in line with those "husbandless" or "independent" women (widows, spinsters) who were considered heads of their households and were already entitled to vote under the law (Sutphin 400–401). This essay argued for the right of married women to suffrage by highlighting the extant right of unmarried women, a point which I will resurrect later in this chapter. Change for all women, Webster believed, would come from the revision of misogynist legislation enacted by men.

After Jacob Bright's Suffrage Bill (1870, the first women's suffrage bill) and others were soundly defeated, Webster honed in on the public anxiety over what might happen if women thought for themselves and became too independent:

> There are fears that [women] will make matrimony illegal, suppress cooking, and have the Prime Minister chosen for his good looks and his skill at lawn-tennis. It is also apprehended that they will at once throw off all their present customs, tastes, virtues, and attractions — which, as is well known, are the compensations bestowed on them by nature for the absence of a vote — and will become

> coarse-featured un-mannerly hybrids, men-hating and hateful to men. They will wear coats and trousers, they will refuse to sew on shirt-buttons, they will leave off poudre de riz and auricomiferous waters, they will be Bishops and Judges, and will break all the commandments. (Leighton 169, *HO* 273).

Webster ironically predicts what the public thinks might happen if women were to vote for issues that would allow them to step outside their angel in the house role, which had been designed to atone for the choice made by their sinful mother Eve. Women would do away with marriage altogether by deeming it "illegal," and in so doing, would stop cooking, hire the Prime Minister as their boy-toy, and overall would cause utter chaos by dismissing any sort of "customs," conventions, or "virtues." The angels in the house, those women whose daily domestic virtue was supposed to nurture a social and national paradise as atonement for Eve's wrong choice, would become "coarse-featured un-mannerly hybrids" who, in "refus[ing] to sew on shirt buttons," "wearing coats and trousers," and claiming the roles of "Bishops and Judges," would no doubt destroy the patriarchal institutions of marriage, religion, and law through their irrational vote. Webster implies through irony what she views as the only role socially sanctioned for women: they must marry, have culinary talents, stay out of political affairs, cultivate and maintain certain manners and their physical appearance, and above all, obey the "commandments" put forth by society and God.

At the same time as Webster's remarks, novelist and journalist Eliza

Lynn Linton offered a more straight-forward opinion in "The Modern Revolt," published in *Macmillan's Magazine* (1870), about the two popular schools of thought regarding women:

> one, the cynical school, making [women] the authors of all the evil afloat, sly, intriguing, unreasonable, influenced only by self-interest, governed only by fear, cruel, false, and worthless; while another, more poetic and quite as untrue, paints them as seraphic creatures gliding through a polluted world in a self-evolved atmosphere of purity and holiness and ignorance of evil. . . . [N]o school has yet upheld them as sober, rational, well-informed beings with brains to regulate their impulses, yet with more love than calculation; . . . — women who do not care to make a fool's paradise of Arcadian innocence for themselves[.] (142)

I introduce Linton's more direct commentary here to complement Webster's wry take and to position her argument within a "Modern Revolt," as Linton titles the article in which she advocates for women working outside the home, voting, and obtaining property rights. Though Linton reinforces nineteenth-century gender norms in the article by suggesting that women must take care of their household duties first and foremost, she joins Webster in proclaiming that a woman has the potential to do more with her life than "make a fool's paradise of Arcadian [pastoral] innocence" and that women are more complex than the role of "sly," "unreasonable" self-absorbed "authors of all the evil" or pure "seraphic creatures" devoid of all evil knowledge allows them to be.

But marriage, or rather becoming a "professional good wife and mother," was the "highest ambition" for any "good girl of any social class," as Judith Rowbotham states in *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction*, since mid-nineteenth-century England did not offer much for women in the way of guaranteeing a secure future (Rowbotham 12, 223). They could seek respectable employment as a governess, seamstress, or housekeeper, domestic vocations that still allowed them to wear the angel of the house "halo," albeit one belonging to a lesser angel (Rowbotham 223), yet marriage was still the goal. As Webster wrote in "Husband-hunting and Matchmaking" (1879): "While young women know, and their parents know for them, that marriage is not merely the happiest and fittest condition to which they can look forward, but the only happy and fit condition — the only escape from dependence on charity or on their own incompetences, from loss of social position, and from all the hardships and hazards of an unskilled gentlewoman's precarious existence" (qtd. in Sutphin 385). Despite Webster's public advocacy and writings on behalf of women's labor and education, she does not offer any "escape from dependence" or outside employment to Eleanor/Lady Boycott in *A Woman Sold*, published a year after *Dramatic Studies* and before Webster's career in journalistic social commentary picked up steam. In the drama, Webster depicts marriage as the middle class's only possible option — the only "happy and fit condition" — for her female protagonist's future.

However, Webster puts Eleanor in a situation where she cannot achieve happiness or maintain her virtue no matter the choice, where money in fact

becomes impossibly intertwined with love and duty. On the surface, Eleanor's choice appears simple: marry the young enterprising Lionel, whom she loves and who attempts to protect her womanly honor, as opposed to the wealthy Sir Joyce, who tempts her away. However, Webster makes things more complex by showing that choosing either man — either marriage — leads Eleanor to a sinful situation; no matter if Eleanor remains faithful to love or remains dutiful to her family, her identity, virtue, independence, and future will be "sold" in one way or another.

Although Lionel initially takes on the role of righteous fiancé, Webster complicates Eleanor's relationship with Lionel by tainting his supposedly pure love for Eleanor with materiality; near the end of the drama, after Lionel has convinced Eleanor to renounce her parents' wishes and marry him, his language of love changes into a rhetoric of ownership and economics. When she embraces him, he asks her, "My Eleanor,/You are my own again, is it not so?" (I, 271–272). His use of the word "own" twists the dynamic of their virtuous love into one of possession. She becomes his property, reflecting the fact that in 1867, when *A Woman Sold* was published, women were legally considered part of the property or estate of a man once they married.[13] Lionel promises Eleanor "a simple home where things are smoothed/By love more than by spending" (I, 290–291), but goes on to say: "I'm prospering, love./I shall not win for long what was to be/My goal for claiming you, the promised prize" (I, 304–306).

[13]The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 legally made married women the rightful owners of the money they earned and gave them the ability to inherit property. Women were then no longer considered to be part of their husband's property.

The juxtaposition of the phrasing "I'm prospering" against the word "love" links the endearment — a symbol for her — to his prosperity, or monetary success. Eleanor becomes an object that aspiring lawyer Lionel plans to soon "win"; his goal is to make enough money to "claim" her, his "promised prize." He tells Eleanor he must go to work and will only return when he can say, "[T]here is room for you/In a fit home which I have earned" (I, 309–310). This line casts her as an object with which to decorate his appropriate "fit home," and the phrasing, "There is room," implies that she will be one object among many, but he will make "room" for her. Eleanor begs him not to leave her for work, but he dismisses her: "Nay, dear, I must work./ Clients and causes stand no truanting:/And I am greedy to heap up gains" (I, 312–314). Lionel openly admits his "greed," which points directly to his last line in the drama, "Sir Joyce can never buy my wife away" (I, 320). Once Eleanor is "[his] wife," the middle class, upwardly mobile Lionel will have ownership and the power over Sir Joyce, which indicates that Lionel's "good," righteous love for Eleanor is no more virtuous than Sir Joyce's "mercenary" proposition. Yet ultimately, even though both possible marriages are "mercenary" at their core, Eleanor still has no other choice but to accept one of the proposals.

In order to uphold her responsibility as a dutiful daughter, Eleanor cannot value her love for Lionel over her allegiance to her family. As Judith Rowbotham suggests, the Victorian family and its social and cultural power was grounded in religion, particularly in the fifth commandment:"honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long (and thy status assured) in

the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (54). Essentially, in order to have a long comfortable life on Earth (and in Heaven), children, particularly girls, had to obey their parents. Within the family unit, "[g]ood girls always had their Bible and prayer book close to hand," and a "good girl's behavior" derived from unselfish submission (Rowbotham 23, 54). In fact, young women were constantly being reminded through didactic fiction, as well as guides and manuals on practical domestic matters, that self-sacrifice and family loyalty in the image of Christ were their responsibility (Rowbotham 56,59).[14] Although young ambitious Lionel, with the social, economic, and political privileges doled out to him as a mid-nineteenth-century middle class man, would be expected to receive Eleanor's "unselfish submission" as her husband, Eleanor is a single young woman living in her parents' home under their care and commandment (as decreed by God). So, as Rowbotham proclaims in the title of her book, to be a "good girl," Eleanor must make a "good wi[fe]," which means, to her parents, marrying Sir Joyce. Thus, Webster argues that a society based on religious ideology places some unmarried women of the mid-nineteenth-century in an impossible situation: you must love and you must listen to your parents.

In 1864, only three years before the publication of *A Woman Sold*, an article in the high-church quarterly *The Christian Remembrancer* pronounced that women were "[p]rone to worship, prone to lean"; in fact, a woman "has

[14]Though I won't discuss this here, I find it fascinating that Webster's *Household Opinions* rhetorically plays with the genre of "domestic matters."

pleasure in submission, in bowing to authority, in the consciousness that her trust outstrips her reason, in a double faith — faith in her religion, and in him that teaches it"(*Remembrancer* 391). A woman's "pleasure," then, came from "bowing to authority," but Eleanor cannot "bo[w]" to both Lionel and her family, and thus must disobey "authority" one way or another. As a result, Eleanor can never be virtuous in the eyes of society no matter whom she marries. In presenting Eleanor with this choice that prevents her from attaining moral, personal, or social worth, Webster illustrates the need for unmarried women to have alternatives to marriage and speaks to a cause she will strongly advocate in the future: the idea that if women were allowed a strong education and professional opportunity, they could financially support themselves and would not have to base their virtue or worth on marriage. They wouldn't have to be responsible for creating and maintaining a, to reference Linton, "fool's paradise." In building her theory about the metaphorical closet, Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* states that "[i]gnorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (4). Sedgwick's statement, though employed in her own argument through a discourse of homosexuality, seems appropriate for how Webster, in trapping Eleanor between two marriages and two authority figures and not suggesting the merest hint of educational or employment opportunity for Eleanor, reveals the ways in which sociomythology keeps Eleanor ignorant and immobilizes her energies, desires, and "meanin[g]" as both "goods" and a

woman.[15]

Bearing Fruit: A Budding Mobility in the Closet/Drama

The closet drama, with its focus on the conflict of the psyche, seems an appropriate medium in which to situate the narrative of a female protagonist whose future, not to mention her conscience, identity, and worth, is bound by ideologically constructed closets. Additionally, relative to the way the closet drama genre was slipping further into the literary closet of the nineteenth-century,[16] *A Woman Sold*, as a closet drama, commented on the way women were being pushed deeper into institutional and ideological closets where they had no control of their lives or even their own thoughts. Webster could have written Eleanor/Lady Boycott's story as a dramatic monologue similar to "By the Looking-Glass," especially since the basic narrative of *A Woman Sold* also critiques the way in which the private, personal spaces of a nineteenth-century

[15]Again, I see ample opportunity to reach into Sedgwick's theories, particularly with regard to the way she suggests that "sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge [and] may represent the most intimate violence possible" (26). *A Woman Sold* pre-dates the texts that Sedgwick explores in her work, but it certainly reflects many of her theories and deserves more space to do so.

[16]Webster's choice to write a closet drama for the telling of *A Woman Sold* gains further meaning when regarded in the context of closet drama written during the Romantic period, which officially ended with the ascension of Queen Victoria in 1837, but lingered in its influence for some years after. As discussed in my Introduction to this dissertation and in my chapter on George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, Romantic writers, as a response to what they saw as the decay in the quality of writing for the stage, revived and revised the closet drama to foster a more meaningful "theater of the mind." During the period, Charles Lamb seemed to express the shared feeling of his fellow closet dramatists when he wrote: "On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear, — we are in his mind" (Burroughs 9). The stage had become a farce to "serious" writers like Lamb and Byron. By the 1860s, the drama-written-to-be-read was becoming passé.

woman are invaded and impacted by the dictates of society. Instead, Webster used a closet drama, a genre that resembles the dramatic monologue in its blend of drama and interiority yet includes other characters and subsequently incorporates other voices and perspectives, to recontextualize, dramatize, and assert a similar, but more complex rhetorical message. In this section, I want to show how Webster's choice of genre for *A Woman Sold* works together with narrative and form to expose the limited range of social motion allowed her female protagonist, particularly in the context of marriage, and in fact, implicates that institution as a closet, a private domestic space to which women are exiled and emotionally paralyzed.

A Woman Sold certainly fits with the more conventional mental theater of the Romantic period, but also nods to the idea of closet drama put forth during that time by poet/dramatist Joanna Baillie.[17] As Catherine Burroughs noted in *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Writers*, Baillie viewed the closet drama as a theatrical or public performance of what Burroughs calls "real-life closet dramas," personal events or moments that often occurred in private spaces (89). According to Burroughs, Baillie recognized the value in revealing the "traditionally unseen and unheard" and believed theater audiences would get as much out of spying on

[17]Baillie, who wrote dramas for both stage and page from 1790 to just before she died in 1851, purposefully imagined her dramas as if they would be performed, though some were never acted in her lifetime. For more detailed information about Baillie and her view of the closet drama, see Chapter 3, "Joanna Baillie's Theater of the Closet: Female Romantic Playwrights and Preface Writing," in Catherine Burroughs' *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Writers* (1997), and *The Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie*, ed. Judith Bailey Slagle (1999).

men's actions, to quote Baillie in her *Introductory Discourse* from 1798, "in the closet as well as in the field" (Burroughs 90). But while Baillie identified "the closet's dramatic potential" by publicly producing and staging drama ordinarily enacted in the closet (91), Webster, in contrast, demonstrated the "closet's dramatic potential" at the site of its origin by illustrating, in each act of *A Woman Sold*, her female protagonist's inner conflict through a singular dialogue which she exchanges privately with one other character. Thus, *A Woman Sold* acknowledges the performance of its protagonist on the stage of her own "real-life" and shows, through two intimate conversations, that the closet, here manifested as the domestic space of marriage, is actually a public stage. Lionel and Mary in their performative language and purposeful conveyance of middle class expectations regarding the institution of marriage (and its relative, betrothal) and women's roles within that insitution, not only direct Eleanor/Lady Boycott in her emotional and physical performance, but also represent the sources of Eleanor/Lady Boycott's inner conflict, as well as her conscience and her audience, marking the public role she must play, even in private.

When *A Woman Sold* begins, Eleanor Vaughan must verbally defend her decision to marry Sir Joyce, especially since Lionel regards her critically, oddly, as illustrated when Eleanor remarks in the second and third lines of the drama that he looks "so strangely" at her. She proceeds to justify her potential marriage by explaining that she has "[s]o many reasons" to marry Sir Joyce, including pressure from her mother and her friends, who will hear

"no Noes" in protest. Lionel will not hear of "the lie" Eleanor is considering to live by marrying Sir Joyce and charges ahead in a sixty-seven line speech in which he lectures her, reminds her, about who she is as an unmarried woman:

> . . . a young thing
> In the bud of stainless girlhood, you the like
> Of babies in your fond grave innocence,
> You proud as maidens are who do not know
> What sin and weariness is like in lives
> Smirched by the pitch that seethes[.] (I, 19–24)

Lionel sees Eleanor through a patriarchal, misogynist lens, positioning Eleanor "in the bud of stainless girlhood," where she knows only what others have "told her," where she is protected from the "sin and weariness" of "lives/smirched by the pitch that seethes." I want to point out here the obvious comparison of Eleanor to Eve, as newly created as a babe in her "fond grave innocence," with no hope of development or knowledge. Furthermore, though "bud" can be seen as an image of early growth and potential, I offer a different metaphorical reading, one which looks to the contracted "bud" of a flowering plant as a close-fitting container, a closet of sorts. As I have noted, the initial definition of the word "closet" offered by the OED projects the image of a "small enclosure in the open air," and Lionel's "bud" metaphor could be seen as such an enclosure for Eleanor; she is a "young thing," a baby, a "maiden," trapped inside — closeted, if you will — this closed, immature flower and is never allowed to take full advantage of the open air. In a way, this image of a woman in arrested

development could be seen as a possible outcome for what Eve might have been like should she have stayed in Paradise and never "sinned."

In Act Two, Webster employs Mary to contain and redirect Lady Boycott's feelings and actions. As the widowed Lady Boycott waxes sardonic about her loveless six-year marriage to Sir Joyce, Mary first advises her not to speak of the matter aloud ("I think you should not say it — even now." II, 49), then encourages her to "[h]ush, oh! hush," since she disapproves of Lady Boycott in her "flouting moods" (II, 76). Mary accuses Lady Boycott of "bitter acting" (II, 80) and offers her emotional direction: "You shall not scorn yourself so. Weep, dear, weep./ If you are sad, and bid me comfort you,/ But let be with that jarring heartlessness" (II, 77–79). Webster, in supplying Mary with the commandment "You shall not," along with the imperatives "weep," "bid," and "let," positions Mary as the director of Lady Boycott's performance. Mary does not approve of Lady Boycott covering her grief with a "show of laughter" and "mirth" (II, 81) and urges her friend to demonstrate a more suitable and authentic exhibition, one that is not so heartless or cynical. Through this exchange, Webster indicates that even in a private conversation, Lady Boycott is not allowed to indulge her desires; she must fulfill the desires of Mary, her audience of one. Indeed, Lady Boycott adheres to Mary's direction, even saying to her friend, "You were right to hush me" (II, 82), but does ask Mary to allow her "[t]he ease of complaining," after which she goes on at length to explain her marital remorse: she had "numbed [her heart] to an unsinning deadness" (II, 152) in her relationship with Sir Joyce, though he was kind and generous

to her. However, Mary still chides Lady Boycott for "run[ning] too wild/In [her] regrets" (II, 159–160); "I stop you once again," (II, 159), she says, "I know you had no love" (II, 160). She proceeds to tell Lady Boycott that she has no need to feel guilty about her distant relationship with Sir Joyce. Here, Mary justifies her directives and reasons away Lady Boycott's past:

> But you had no fond passion quick in you
> To make a fever in your heart. That pulsed
> Too slow and chilly. You were faint because
> You had foregone the love on which it lived,
> And you knew that. (II, 168–172)

Although Mary does not use imperatives or commandments here to demand a present change of action or emotion from Lady Boycott, Mary projects her own sanctioned interpretation of Lady Boycott's past. In this way, Mary characterizes Lady Boycott according to her own assumptions and redeems her as a woman who entered into a mercenary marriage and, as such, acted properly. After all, Lady Boycott had "foregone the love" required for a socially sanctioned marriage, and her heart, as a result, had pulsed "too slow and chilly," not to mention, Mary adds, that Lady Boycott tore "the blossom of [her heart's] hope with [her] own hand" and now "hunger[s] in a barren day/Because it bears no fruit" (II, 214–216). Though Lady Boycott tries to protest Mary's influence and regain control of the conversation — "let me break my heart" (II, 224) — Mary does not "let" her. Webster places Mary, through

her language, as an agent of Lady Boycott's past, present, and future, confining Lady Boycott to Mary's directives and assertions, all of which attempt to guide Lady Boycott back onto the path of love. Lady Boycott, in Mary's eyes, must realize she has eaten the forbidden fruit and accept the consequences.

In addition, while Lionel, as a member of the patriarchy, preaches to Eleanor about what role he believes she must play, Mary "preach[es] a little hope/out of [her] simple life" (II, 467–468) as a role model. When Lady Boycott tires of her own diatribe and bids Mary to "[t]alk of something else/Of anything but me" (II, 465–466), Mary decides to talk about herself, but her description of her love life (her engagement to Lionel) serves not as a lighthearted change of subject for her friend, but as an example for Lady Boycott to emulate. Mary explains that she was once hurt by love when a former fiancé impregnated another woman. She told him to marry the other woman, which he did. Heartbroken, she "was heavy for the loss of love" (II, 482) but found hope and happiness in a new love. She tells Lady Boycott, "And now/I am happy, happy! Better too than that,/I make him happy — though that means the same" (II, 495–497). Making her new fiance Lionel happy "means the same" for Mary as her own happiness. Their love "[i]s part of daily life" (II, 525), a "bright monotony" (II, 537). Lady Boycott protests Mary's feelings with her own string of assertions and commandments:

> Mary, you do not love him. ...
> You do not love him. No,
> Not with your heart, the very life in you —,

> Less will not do. You must not; no, you must not.
> You shall not marry so. (II, 516–519)

But because Mary has already established that Lady Boycott is "acting" scornful and heartless, Lady Boycott's attempt to gain control, act on her own feelings, and instruct Mary is futile. Mary tells Lady Boycott that she will change her mind when she meets Mary's fiancé Lionel Ellerton and finally realizes what love is: "You'll know how far from possible it were/ For the woman who loves Lionel Ellerton/To love a little. ... You'll know what a rich thing my sunshine is" (II, 531–533, 544). Under Mary's direction, Lady Boycott will "know" the truth of love, and Mary's repetition of "You'll" performatively commands the inevitable.

Webster also indicates Eleanor/Lady Boycott's limited options through the two-act form of *A Woman Sold*, which splits Eleanor/Lady Boycott's life into two parts, before and after her mercenary marriage to Sir Joyce. Webster might have just as easily told the story in three or five acts, further exploring, for example, the courtship of Lionel and Eleanor prior to the conversation that opens the play, Eleanor's familial relationship, or even the marital relationship that unfolds between Eleanor and Sir Joyce. Instead, Webster structures the drama around two key turning points: the moment when the unmarried Eleanor must choose between being tempted and virtuous and the moment when the widowed Lady Boycott must choose between allowing others to control her life or deciding to act for herself. Form and narrative thus unite to reflect a leitmotif of duality commonly found across nineteenth-century

texts and ultimately represent the binaries that cause Eleanor/Lady Boycott's conflicts — good/evil, love/money, sin/piety, temptation/resistance, redemption/ruin, man/woman, and self/other, as signified by the character's own double moniker.[18] Together, the two acts identify and unify the absolutes of the sociomythologically constructed existence as the angel in the house/post-fall Eve from which Eleanor/Lady Boycott eventually breaks free late in Act Two, just before the drama ends.

Eleanor/Lady Boycott's identity as built on ideological binaries is immediately established in the initial exchange between Lionel and Eleanor in Act One:

> **Lionel.**
> Then it is true!
> **Eleanor.**
> Oh, Lionel, you look
> So strangely at me.

The very first line of the drama, Lionel's "Then it is true!," signals only two possibilities for his discovery (as-yet-undefined for the reader): to be "true"

[18] As mentioned in my earlier chapter on *The Spanish Gypsy*, Claire Rosenfeld in "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double" talks about how the Victorians saw "two opposing selves" and the two sides represented the "socially acceptable or conventional personality" while " the other externaliz[ed] the free, uninhibited, often criminal self" (327–328). Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* also denotes certain binaries or "pairings as basic to modern cultural organization," for example, "masculine/feminine, majority/minority, natural/artificial," and so on. Sedgwick discusses these binaries in the context of the binary homosocial/homosexual, which I will not bring into the argument in this chapter (73).

or false. This single, emphatic statement immediately forces Eleanor's answer into a track of confirmation or denial, "true" or untrue, and, coupled with Lionel's critical countenance as he "look[s] so strangely" at Eleanor, it also implies her probable involvement in the activity that is or is not "true." Consequently, the first exchange of *A Woman Sold* wastes no time showing its female protagonist having to answer to a man not only for something she may or may not have done, but also for what he expected her to do or not do.

In the nine lines that continue their conversation, Eleanor proceeds to defend and explain for the reader the "truth" of Lionel's discovery, or her recent betrothal to Sir Joyce:

> Think I all alone,
> So many reasons, all my friends so fain,
> My mother pressing me, Sir Joyce so good,
> So full of promises, he who could choose
> No bride among the highest ladies round
> But she would smile elate and all her kin
> Bow low and thank him and go swelled with pride —
> You cannot wonder that my friends declare
> They'll hear no Noes, but force me to my good. (I, 3–11)

She pleads her case as an innocent woman suffering in a social pressure-cooker: her mother is "pressing" (I, 4) her to marry the "good" (I, 4) Sir Joyce, who could have his pick of the "highest ladies" (I, 6), but wants her instead.

Eleanor's friends are also encouraging the match and will not hear her objections, given the fact that any woman would "[b]ow low and thank him and go swelled with pride" (I, 8) at his offer. Eleanor attempts to explain how complicated the situation is, particularly since her mother and her friends believe Sir Joyce to be "so good." But her version of the truth makes her, in Lionel's eyes, "untrue"; Lionel is appalled by this "lie" of a life she is considering and goes on to pronounce her actions as "untrue to that pure self/Of [his] love Eleanor" (I, 16–17), to that "young thing/In the bud of stainless girlhood" (I, 18–19). In other words, if Eleanor leaves him for Sir Joyce, she is staining herself, corrupting her intrinsic purity, denying what Lionel and society believe makes her "true" "pure self."

In Act Two, Lady Boycott seems to have internalized this concept as she recalls to Mary how for six years she "boycotted" all happiness as Sir Joyce's wife and kept her husband at a distance as self-induced punishment for being untrue to love and surrendering her moral purity to material temptation. But Lady Boycott regrets her behavior as Sir Joyce's wife; Sir Joyce objectified her but was generous and kind in his treatment of her, yet she still, as atonement for her mercenary choice, refrained from showing him any affection:

> Ah! he had
> His rights upon me. He meant me well.
> He was not often hard to me; he gave
> With an unstinting hand for all my whims,
> And tricked me with the costliest fineries

> Almost beyond my wish; was proud of me
> And liked to look at me, and vaunted me,
> My beauty and my grace and stateliness,
> My taste and fashion. (II, 112–120)

Sir Joyce's appreciation of his wife can be considered in a variety of ways, all alluding to his physical/sexual relationship with her. The line "He was not often hard to me" either can be read as evidence that he may not have had a temper or, perhaps, indicates that he did not often force her "cold wifely duty" (II, 277) of sexual intercourse. Read in context with the lines "he had/His rights upon me" followed by "He meant me well" amplifies this latter interpretation, as "rights" could equate to conjugal rights and "well" could signify that he never intentionally wanted to harm her. In fact, going one step farther, the fact that Sir Joyce "gave/With an unstinting hand for all [her] whims," could possibly allude to his contribution from time to time to Lady Boycott's own sexual pleasure.

Furthermore, although in saying that Sir Joyce "tricked" her with the "costliest fineries," Lady Boycott suggests that he might have paid for her physical attentions with material things in the fashion of a prostitute, in the same breath she admits that the "fineries" and "whims" were "almost," but not quite, "beyond her wish." In effect, then, Lady Boycott did wish for what her husband could provide materially and physically; he was not one hundred percent evil, with a "dried up pithless soul" (I, 48), as Lionel describes him in Act One. Consequently, Lady Boycott in Act Two reconsiders not having

reciprocated his kindness, admitting to Mary that she could not even "shar[e] with him little daily thoughts" or "answe[r] when he talked" (II, 133–134). In marrying Sir Joyce, Lady Boycott had "numbed [her heart] to an unsinning deadness" (II, 152), forcing herself not to feel, in both the emotional and physical sense in order to redeem her choice of marrying him. But after keeping herself "true" to the middle class ideals of wives, love, and marriage, she comes to realize that she might have punished both herself and Sir Joyce and, for six years, refused any chance at creating a different sort of Paradise: a mercenary marriage in which love blooms, a Paradise that would be socially unaccepted since the love grew from a union created for economic reasons.

By choosing in Act Two to have the widowed Lady Boycott confess all about her six-year marriage through backstory to Mary, rather than devote an entire "real time" act and a third dialogue directly showing Lady Boycott's relationship to Sir Joyce, Webster emphasizes Lady Boycott's self-inflicted suffering through silence. In thinking about the way in which Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* identifies "closetedness" as "performance initiated . . . by the speech act of silence" and the way in which Sedgwick also considers speech acts, the "explicit and the inexplicit," as "peculiarly revealing" (2–3), the silence of the missing "third act" speaks loudly, even from deep within a closet that cannot even be seen. The omission of this act seems to reveal much in its spectre-like non-performance, particularly in lieu of the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 had not yet gone into effect at the time of the drama's publication, and married

women were considered part of their husband's property; as such, they revoked all rights to property they had held previously in their own names to their husband. Because the married Lady Boycott could not own anything in the eyes of a patriarchal, androcentric law, the silent gap in the drama in which six years supposedly pass marks Lady Boycott's legal identity as an invisible mute. In Act Two, the widowed Lady Boycott tells Mary that she "smiled/A cheating silence for so many years" (II, 53–54) as the "penance to be good/And pretty mannered dull day by dull day" (II, 55–56). Legally, the married Lady Boycott does not have the right to possess anything except "pretty manner[s]"; legally, reminiscent of God's law forbidding Adam and Eve from taking for themselves the fruit of knowledge, God's property (a law that Eve ultimately broke), the married Lady Boycott must remain a beautiful, stately, graceful, ignorant help-meet/angel.

Sedgwick also suggests "the fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and multiple a thing as knowledge" (4). This idea further enhances the meaning of Lady Boycott's "closeted," unwritten, unspoken marriage to Sir Joyce. Specifically, Sedgwick notes the way, with credit to Foucault, that "knowledge" and sex "became conceptually inseparable" after the eighteenth century, with knowledge coming to mean "sexual knowledge" and "ignorance, sexual ignorance" (73). In the first act, Eleanor does not yet "know" Lionel sexually; despite their chaste kisses and embraces, she retains her purity. Even if she had married him, in

the spirit of Patmore's angel (or, the redemptive Eve), she would have remained sexually ignorant, her wifely duty a divine sacrifice made out of love. However, in accepting a mercenary marriage to Sir Joyce, Lady Boycott has been tempted into sexual knowledge with, in a middle class view, Satan, their conjugal relations socially and culturally worthless/worth far less than true love: the "price [she] earned was only smiles/And too familiar fondlings" (II, 111–112). Yet as wife of either man, she must play the part with knowledge and ignorance, either way "a woman sold." As Lionel's wife, she would have been considered the fit angel of the fit house, haloed object symbolic of a prospering middle class. As Sir Joyce's, she is viewed as the whim and property of the upper class, or Satan himself.

Yet by leaving a hole between two acts that signifies Lady Boycott's marriage to Sir Joyce, Webster opens space for Lady Boycott to eventually experience a new awareness, the ironic realization that marriage to Sir Joyce was not the extreme "unholy bargain" or "treachery" that Lionel, and society, deemed it (I, 209, 281). Going into the marriage, she had wanted to see the "bad harsh tyranny" (II, 143) of Sir Joyce, and although he touched her with a "condescending husbandly caress" (II, 145), she also had noted his "kindness and his smile" (II, 144). The knowledge that she gained through her marriage to Sir Joyce was related not only to sexuality, then, but also to love and, consequently, morality. As Sir Joyce suffered through his final moments, Lady Boycott "seemed to love him" (II, 375–376), as she tells Mary in Act Two, and suddenly realized how much she and her husband both suffered from her

complete renunciation of any sort of love between them, as well as from her renunciation of him, as the man who supposedly represented social ruin for her and for society at large. She had "dreamed, not loving him, I loved/No other then" (II, 150–151); in other words, in never allowing herself to truly care for Sir Joyce, she had believed she could honor — by forgetting — what she saw as her pure, socially acceptable love for Lionel. In this way, the void Webster leaves to mark Lady Boycott's six-year relationship to Sir Joyce begins to fill with the possible consequences of the two choices that exist on either side for Eleanor/Lady Boycott, and the tension of remembering and reevaluating those choices pushes toward a social and personal awakening for her in the end. The void eventually fills and spills over into Act Two, representing a new source of power for Lady Boycott: widowhood.

Lady Boycott's status as a widow directly connects to the variable, off-page, fill-in-the-blank of her marriage to Sir Joyce. As Dagni Ann Bredesen notes in "Categorical Exceptions: Widows, Sexuality, and Fictions of (Dis)Coverture in Victorian Domestic and Imperial Narratives," the widow "is a marker of the gap left by the husband, an absence to be filled," while also "a figure of excess and overflow that needs to be contained" (7). Lady Boycott exemplifies this image in bemoaning both the loss of her husband as well as the loss of any chance with her former lover. She is essentially questioning who she should be, now that all the men in her life had left vast "absence[s] to be filled" in her identity, yet concurrently, her long rambling monologues (though interrupted by Mary) illustrate "an overflow that needs to be con-

tained." In either case, Lady Boycott as nineteenth-century widow, a woman whose identity is no longer subsumed by her husband's, was doomed to the same "filling," "containing," and general controlling that she experienced as an unmarried woman and a wife.

But Bredesen also defines widowhood as a "site of category collapse," where this lack and overflow swirl into each other to create a nexus of sexual, legal, social, and economic identities for the widow (8). At once, widow is maiden and wife, respectable and disrespected, poor and enterprising (7–9). Here in this nexus, Lady Boycott "burst[s]/[Her] serious due disguise of widowhood" (II, 90–91), denying her role as the container or the contained. True, she wishes she could recapture "young girl follies" (II, 72). True, she regrets the way she treated her husband, still harbors feelings for the man she once loved, and scoffs at the hope — and her foolishness — that remains. True, her exile from domestic paradise has made her cynical with regard to love, and her sour outlook could be viewed as a cautionary tale. But as Act Two winds down and Mary exits the scene leaving Lady Boycott alone, Webster allows the widow to finally take control through a monologue. In shifting to a monologue from the give-and-take of a dialogue, Webster recognizes a new independence and authority in Lady Boycott, and for the first time, the closet becomes a place where Lady Boycott can think for herself, speak without interruption, and and make a choice to follow her own desires.

This change occurs after Lady Boycott has finished telling Mary about her marriage to Sir Joyce and has recapitulated feelings and events that have

developed over the last six years. After releasing her pent-up emotion, Lady Boycott then discovers, a few moments before Mary's fiancé comes to the house to pick her up, that Mary's fiancé is Lionel. Out of respect to her friend, Lady Boycott does not reveal to Mary that Lionel is the man she still loves and insists that Mary "not betray" to Lionel her secret feelings for Sir Joyce or the unnamed man she let get away — what Lady Boycott refers to as her "[w]eak baby trash." Mary then hears evidence of Lionel's arrival in an exterior room of the house and goes to fetch him, leaving Lady Boycott alone to figure out what to do:

> *Her* Lionel! *Her* husband! Oh my heart,
> The pain in it! *Her* lover! If I wait
> She'll say, "We've Lady Boycott here," and then
> The quick surprise may make him tell her more
> Than she should know. No, I must go to him
> Welcome him briskly, wear the cheerful face of
> Pleasant meeting: he's my friend's betrothed,
> And I must take him so. 'Twere easier
> To ape indifference, dislike itself.
> But I can play my part, and naturally,
> And he'll not tell her, he'll be so at ease,
> So careless of me.
> For she must not know[.] (I, 601–613)

Lady Boycott is hurt by the knowledge that Lionel will be Mary's husband and lover. She makes a quick decision: rather than wait for Mary to bring Lionel

into the room and risk Lionel's stunned realization, Lady Boycott chooses to be pro-active and "go to him/Welcome him briskly, wear the cheerful face/Of pleasant meeting," determined to "play [her] part, and naturally," to put him at ease and head off any potential awkwardness.

She continues her monologue — the only moment in the drama when she is alone "on stage" — and further explores her feelings about the predicament, about the role she must play, and about how she and Lionel will behave:

> Oh my rare smiling part!
> My pretty cordial acting! We shall be
> A genial pair of friends. We both love her,
> And there's our bond. Oh! to be day by day
> Talking and talking, smiling and smiling! Well
> It will not last forever. I have lied
> In smiles and saying nothings prettily
> To a worse purpose ere to-day. (II, 622–626)

Rather than slowly draw away from her friendship with Mary or die some contrived death as was the mid-nineteenth-century literary trend for female characters who did not make the right social choices, Lady Boycott, even in the knowledge of Mary's love for Lionel, chooses to be Lionel's friend, "cordial" and gregarious in her demeanor. An obvious and easy reading of this verse suggests Lady Boycott is reverting back to the ways of her married self or even the unmarried Eleanor, biting her tongue and playing the part of the virtuous woman who values others' feelings above her own. She must feign happiness

yet again "in smiles," just as she did in her marriage to Sir Joyce. Her voice will again be silenced beneath pretty "nothings," though her silent suffering for Mary will be far better than her silent marital suffering.

But I want to offer a different reading, one that shows Lady Boycott's declaration in a less restricted light, one that offers a different possibility. Just prior to the eight lines above, Lady Boycott pronounces her affection for Mary, saying that she "loves her for herself" (II, 617). Therefore, Lady Boycott's acting becomes more about supporting another woman's desire — as well as her own — and less about adhering to patriarchal standards, as well as moral and gender expectations. She expresses the love of friendship, something she seems to never have experienced as Eleanor, whose friends only are only mentioned by Webster briefly in the context of forcing her to marry Sir Joyce. Lady Boycott wants to genuinely support her friend in growing a life and love with Lionel. Through her affection for Mary, Lady Boycott will try to be "genial friends" with Lionel; granted, she believes the role "will not last forever," but I interpret this phrase to mean that even though the role would continue until death do they part, she would endure. Because Lady Boycott regrets her insincerity as Sir Joyce's wife and despises herself for the charade, she is ready or at least willing to embrace a new kind of love, beyond the love associated with marriage. She seeks to create a stronger bond with Lionel through their love for Mary, a bond that even suggests a more spiritual connotation through the holy significance of the name "Mary."

In fact, the last four lines of the drama could be read as a resurrection

of sorts for Lady Boycott as she proclaims:

> Lionel, I'm coming to you; I, not Eleanor:
> She's gone, she's dead. But, as for Lady Boycott,
> Perhaps you'll like her . . . she is Mary's friend. (II, 635–638)

Eleanor is "gone, she's dead," but the widowed Lady Boycott has declared that she will take her place. She identifies herself as "Mary's friend," empowering herself with moral credibility, loyalty, and devotion. Webster closes the drama on the image of a triangle of friendship that offers a potential for a love that allows Lady Boycott to finally claim her existence and her desires.

"A Dreamy Sort of Time": Conclusion

The combination of understated allegory and contemporary themes in *A Woman Sold* draws Eleanor's conflict into a space between time and place, myth and realism, reflecting the phrase Lady Boycott uses in opening Act Two: "[a] dreamy sort of time" (II, 4). Indeed, the issues in *A Woman Sold* reflect those of concern to a mid-nineteenth-century audience, but the subtle allusion to the myth that surrounds Eve, or the "first woman," together with the drama's lack of stage directions, evokes an ambulatory quality that suggests the issues are not particular to just an individual woman, a specific year, a distinctive experience, or a precise location. Thus, the dialogues between Eleanor and Lionel and Lady Boycott and Mary become emblematic: through them, Webster suggests that the conflict in this drama is not new, but rather began with humanity itself, and consequently grew immalleable as history

unfolded. In this way, Webster argues that woman has forever been sold — on myth, ideologies, and gender prescriptions, and as a result of it all, the nature of her very own identity.

But, as Eleanor becomes first the wife, then the widow, and, lastly, woman in her own right, Webster offers the possibility of revising those mandates as well as moving beyond them. Lady Boycott, in looking to a friendship with Mary and Lionel rather than matrimony as an option for her future, trades patriarchal relationships to honor the desires of a female friend. She is no longer invisible or mute. She is no longer bound by her family, her fiancé, her husband. Webster thus rethinks Eve's future by showing a woman nearly smothered by her closet Paradise who still manages to grow a new-found identity and personal awareness, and, ultimately, plants new boundaries in order to survive her way.

A Woman Sold also predicts the irony Webster will use later in her career. While the drama could appear like a cautionary tale for nineteenth-century women about the pitfalls of choosing mercenary marriage over a marriage based on love, the construction of the drama offers a reading which implies that women need more than marriage to prevent them from having to rely on their parents or men for their futures, to prevent them from selling themselves literally and figuratively, to prevent them from basing their worth and virtue on mythology that paralyzes their choices.

Chapter 5

Further Renovations of the Closet Drama: Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I want to round out my discussion of *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold* by showing how my work might lead to expansive fields of further analysis about closet drama and sociocultural connections to genre and form. The fundamental argument in this dissertation centers on the ways in which George Eliot, Michael Field, and Augusta Webster used the closet drama — a genre written in dramatic form, but intended for private reading or performance rather than the commercial stage — to expose and, in turn, reform the figurative and literal closets that limited social and cultural possibilities for nineteenth-century women. In their unification of the genre, form, and narrative of these closet dramas, Eliot, Field, and Webster established, to return to the definition offered by Straznicky that opened this dissertation, their own "cultural fields," spaces of private and public exchange where their female protagonists could confront these limitations and acknowledge both their individual desires and those desires representative of a larger community. Rather than mire their female protagonists in the personal angst of the soul, a characteristic of the solipsistic closet drama written by male Romantics, Eliot, Field, and Webster showed contemplation and internal con-

flict as a catalyst for their female protagonists to discover possibilities brought on by self-awareness and social engagement. Ultimately, this dissertation is about how Eliot, Field, and Webster used the closet drama to critique the patriarchal and misogynist ideologies that shaped nineteenth-century gender roles for women, as well as the stages on which they had to perform those roles. Within this "cultural field" of the closet drama, the farther away these three authors moved from Victorian reality, the larger opportunity their fictional protagonist was offered for mobility, action, and change. Yet, these authors also seemed to suggest that the more epic the life of the female protagonist, the less real potential a nineteenth-century woman had for that same sort of grand destiny, unless she began to view her sociocultural mythology in a new way. To return to Eliot's quotation from *Middlemarch*, a Victorian woman was somewhat doomed to be "a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion" (3). These three dramas used nonrealism to suggest nineteenth-century women needed a new past, new collective memories, and new monuments to mark futures that would not be forgotten.

New Directions for Study: *Eliot, Field, and Webster*

Other closet dramas written by Eliot, Field, and Webster would provide rich material in support of this investigational direction. Eliot only wrote one other closet drama, *Armgart*(1870), about a successful opera singer who must entertain new possibilities for the future when she loses her voice. The closet drama, set in the nineteenth-century, deals with a woman's artistic talent, ambition, identity (as a woman and a woman artist), sexuality, fame, and

performance, which critics like Grace Kehler, Britta Zangen, Renata Kobetts Miller, Louise Hudd, Susan Brown, and Rebecca A. Pope have addressed. But the fact that Eliot told the story about a stage prima donna in a closet drama rather than through a novel begs a thorough examination of how the closet drama enhances meaning for this narrative about a woman who reveres and loses the identity she had cultivated on the public stage, a stage where her starring roles were male characters. Susan Brown begins this type of investigation in "Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women," but does not give the topic the space it requires.

Field's vast dramatic canon is fertile ground for study, as many of their closet dramas have been mentioned in emerging scholarship but have rarely been studied in depth. Several of the works could be read in the context of Shakespearean drama as was Bradley and Cooper's intention for the reader, evidenced by the women's shared journal and personal correspondence in which they discussed channeling the genius whom they, in the trend of Victorian writers, regarded as the premier dramatist. Shakespeare was a cultural icon for nineteenth-century artists, and Field's dramas, which undeniably resonate with his influence, demand analysis of the way Shakespearian convention, in theme, characterization, and form, greatly affected nineteenth-century constructs of society, politics, and culture, gender and sexuality. Furthermore, in the context of Bradley and Cooper's collaboration and unique relationship, all of Field's dramas support opportunity for critical dialogue about the

private/public intersection of art, identity, and performance, as manifested through the Victorians' cultural insitutionalization of Shakespearian tradition.

After *A Woman Sold*, Webster wrote three more closet dramas: *The Auspicious Day* (1872), *In a Day* (1882), and *The Sentence* (1887). Though all three dramas are set in different times and places – an aristocratic court during the days of witchcraft, ancient Greece, and ancient Rome, respectively – they are thematically connected to each other and to *A Woman Sold*. *The Auspicious Day* uses the metatheatrical issues as an opportunity to comment on gender roles and women's performance as the drama features a play-within-a-play, a production reminiscent of the Romantic mental theater with an all-woman cast playing abstract roles like Love, Constancy, and Fame. The manner in which the men watching the play comment on how well the young women fit their roles encourages a closer look at how Webster used this metatheatrical device to critique issues of women's social performance, their confinement and agency with regard to certain ideological constructs, and their roles in social institutions like marriage – issues common to all three of Webster's plays. The historical and temporal distance Webster employs in these dramas would make for interesting and layered comparison to that of Webster's poetic translations, as well as of her politically charged essays, provoking new discussion about the rhetorical result of genre, form, and content.

Other Women Closet Dramatists of the Nineteenth-Century

I hope the consideration of the rhetorical form and function in the closet dramas by Eliot, Field, and Webster will turn a critical eye toward the work

of other female closet dramatists of the long nineteenth-century to illustrate how the dramatic form not only contributed meaning to the story the authors were trying to tell, but also allowed them to comment on the female agency (or lack of agency), in public and private situations. Felicia Hemans' *Siege of Valencia* (1823), for example, shares common ground with *The Spanish Gypsy* as a closet drama with female characters who take on epic roles. The narrative of this drama, set in eleventh-century Spain during a Moor invasion, offers strong female characters in Elmina, a mother who directly pleads to the marauders for the safe return of her son who was captured, and Ximena, a young woman who takes a leadership role in the cause when her city has lost hope. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile* (1845), a text that remains understudied, yet ripe for criticism on many levels, responds to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and, stylistically modeled on Greek tragedy, follows Adam and Eve's exile from Paradise. The narrative focuses on Eve as she deals with the guilt and consequences of her sinful deed; however, Barrett Browning seems to use the drama to question nineteenth-century gender roles and attitudes constructed by Milton's revision of the patriarchal myth. Like *A Drama of Exile*, Vernon Lee's *Ariadne in Mantua: A Romance in Five Acts* (1903) is not often recognized in the context of Lee's overall literary accomplishments despite being well-received by critics, one of whom marked the work as "the most self-revealing of all Vernon Lee's work" (Gunn 179). *Ariadne in Mantua: A Romance in Five Acts* also invites examination of gender, sexuality, and identity issues through a historical lens. Set in Italy

during the Holy Wars, the story revolves around Ferdinand, a Duke's son who returns home emotionally scarred after being held captive in a Moorish prison. His uncle hires Diego, "a Spanish singer of Moorish descent" (line) to lift Ferdinand's spirits. In reality, Diego is Magdalen, a courtesan/slave with whom Ferdinand fell in love while in captivity. The Cardinal, desperate for Ferdinand to marry the Princess Hippolyta and produce an heir to secure the family line, believes Magdalen can use the feminine charms hidden under her male disguise to cure Ferdinand's mood. But as Hippolyta and Ferdinand both succumb to Diego's wit and manner, the play recalls Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and demands exploration from that angle, yet it also welcomes study of how Lee's construction of the closet drama shapes the rhetoric about the performance of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century.

Closet Drama by Nineteenth-Century Women and Sedgwick's Theories of the Closet

My work in this chapter only peels away the first layer of what I see as a larger, more densely-stratified investigation promoted by Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and her earlier work, *Between Men.* In this dissertation, I merely scratch the surface in analyzing the ways in which these nineteenth-century dramas portray the Victorian closet as a literal and figurative stage regulated by what Sedgwick considers the binarized sociocultural ideologies that were institutionally made "normative" during the period, a stage on which the characters of these dramas struggle to perform their designated roles but ultimately resist them, a stage representative of similar social

and cultural structures of performative confinement outside the text. In the arc of the argument that stretches across *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick traces the effects of male homosocial desire on the societal construction of, and allowance of agency inside, the closet, primarily from the late eighteenth-century to the twentieth. Using Sedgwick's theories more actively to investigate *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold* through the lens of the homosocial continuum, not to mention the comprehensive system of sociocultural valuation created through the homo/heterosexual binary emergent in the nineteenth-century — a methodology not yet fully undertaken by closet drama scholars — confronts the Tzvetan Todorov quotation with which I began this dissertation: "Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong." As examples of the closet drama genre revised by nineteenth-century women writers, *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold* can be seen to "bring to light" and to reform for women (both inside and outside the text) a traditional, institutionalized power play involving identity, gender, and sexuality.

However, Sedgwick's interest in the "oppressive effects on women and men of a cultural system of male-male desire" (*Epistemology* 15) would also "bring to light" the structural power dynamic erected within and between genders (and sexualities) that thematically moors these closet dramas both on and off the page; in this line of study, the female protagonist — and her author — would be viewed as more than victim and champion of her circumstance, and instead as active contributor to and participant in a family of individuals

(male, female alike) affected by the same restrictive and dictative ideological systems. As with Sedgwick's studies in *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Between Men*, the analysis of these closet dramas could reach beyond a feminist approach to a more inclusive conversation about the nineteenth-century homophobic trend reflected in their portrayal of power and identity.

In fact, in reading *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Stephania*, and *A Woman Sold*, for instance, I was struck by the realization that Don Silva, Otho, and Lionel are as much products of patriarchal, homosocial, and misogynist ideologies as Fedalma, Stephania, and Eleanor/Lady Boycott. I am driven to think about the closets to which those male characters are also confined, a consideration that challenges me to imagine what further analysis of these texts might reveal in looking at them from that perspective.

When first introduced in *The Spanish Gypsy*, Silva is identified as belonging to a class of "Castilian gentlemen" who "[c]hoose not their task," but "choose to do it well" (I, 163); in other words, he is given a "task," a duty, but elects to successfully complete it. His internal conflict, like Fedalma's, derives from his coming to terms with an identity split between dedication to self and dedication to others, on one hand "charged" "[b]y the dead gaze of all his ancestors" (I, 182, 180) to "fight for chosen Spain" (I, 179) as a caballero and an epic hero, and on the other, to "guard [Fedalma] from the world" (I, 751) as her fiancé and lover. He is described by the narrator as "lion and man" (I, 1570), yet also a character who "seek[s] to justify [his] public acts/And not [his] private joy" (I, 1669–1670). Thus, he, too, must ultimately struggle with

who he is and what is expected of him as a Spanish Catholic Duke devoted to the duties commanded by his King and his religion, as well as the duties to his true love, the Gypsy queen Fedalma. At the center of Silva's conflict, Eliot positions the Prior, a religious zealot who tries to control Silva's physical and emotional desires for Fedalma. An investigation of the Prior's character development would expose the heart of the ideological and institutional closets that strictly assign roles of gender, race, and class in this world and thus determine the characters' actions, reactions, choices, and futures.

Similar to Silva, Emperor Otho, in *Stephania*, wrestles with duty and desire. In the face of what he sees as a dying Roman empire, he longs "to resign/War, empire, politics, the subtle arts/Of learning, and fall back on ignorance" (I, 328–330), but is reprimanded by his mentor Gerbert for "this forsaking of [his] higher self" (I, 332). Otho considers himself "[d]amned in [his] very destiny" (I, 93) as he longs to join the homosocial world of hermit Romuald but is bound by heredity to rule Rome and to forsake his individual, physical desires. Although I did not pursue the angle in this dissertation, evidence from Bradley's and Cooper's personal archives and journals would provide an interesting lens for Otho's conflict, as the dynamics of their relationship often slipped into male homosocial role play. Examining *Stephania* through the expression, and shifting, of these particular desires would reveal another dimension to the way both manhood and womanhood are treated in Otho's closet.

Like Silva and Otho, Lionel in *A Woman Sold* is also a man shaped

by the duties socioculturally assigned to him. Lionel is a middle-class man trapped by the nineteenth-century patriarchal idea of manhood. His speeches to Eleanor resound with expectations of who she should be and consequently reflect who he is expected to be; if Eleanor, as a "young thing/In the bud of stainless girlhood" (I, 19–20), does not fulfill her promise to marry him, he, as an aspiring lawyer, will not fulfill his responsibilities as a man. Specifically, as a middle-class man who has been ideologically cast to redeem Adam's sin and prevent temptation before it begins, therefore given another chance to hold onto Paradise, Lionel relies on the love of a "stainless" woman like Eleanor to make his life near divine. He "set all his hopes on [her]/Because he had [her] promise" (I, 279–280), and if Eleanor fails him, he will have failed to achieve his "fit home" (I, 328), his Paradise. He will have failed nationhood, empire, and, as inheritor of Adam, God. Additionally, although Sir Joyce is never physically present during the drama, the homosocial connection between him and Lionel draws the boundary of their social and sexual agency as Victorian men: what one man possesses, the other man must buy, own, and mark to increase his worth. This connection would not only further expose the nuances of Eleanor's/Lady Boycott's life in a patriarchal, homosocial culture as transaction (a woman sold between men), but may also suggest that the men in this play are sold on that very idea as well.

In this way, an investigation into how the closet dramas by Eliot, Field, and Webster also structurally emphasize and critique the closet of manhood seems an essential part in fully evaluating how the genre, form, and narrative

of the closet drama work together to make a statement about gender roles, sexuality, the institutions and dogma of religion and marriage, and various other Victorian closets. Specifically, this type of inquiry would identify the closet dramas showcased in this dissertation as exemplary of the way the nineteenth-century closet drama genre could be viewed as a symbolic textual monument for the sociocultural negotiation of gender and sexuality issues that historically closeted the identity, agency, and performance of Victorian men and women alike.

The Twenty-First-Century Resonance of the Closet Drama: The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Soap Opera

Studying the thematic action of three female closet dramatists has also inspired me to think about the representations of women's literal and figurative closets in the twenty-first-century and about what I would classify as closet drama genre in our time. With this in mind, I see the innovative texts in my dissertation as resonating beyond their nineteenth-century context to dialogue with contemporary conversations about womanhood, gender roles, and identity.

My work has prompted me to think about the manifestation of drama in private domestic space (both as physical location and metaphor), which surprisingly has led me to begin examining *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, as well as a nearly extinct genre, the daytime soap opera, as descendants of closet drama. As one of the pioneer examples of "television psychology," *The Oprah Winfrey Show* has been, for over twenty-two seasons, marketed with the mission

of offering strategies for the self-improvement, empowerment, and education of women. I would be interested in contributing to Corinne Squire's work in "Empowering Women? *The Oprah Winfrey Show*" (*Feminism & Psychology*, 4(1994): 63-79) by looking at the television talk show in terms of its closet-edness: how can we see the show itself as a closet? Furthermore, how can we see the show as exposing and opening the doors to certain closets for women? What connections can we make between the fluidity of public and private spaces (domestic and otherwise) in nineteenth-century closet drama and the fluidity of public and private spaces illuminated by *The Oprah Winfrey Show*? How does the relationship between the psyche and action in nineteenth-century closet drama speak to the relationship between the psyche and action touted by Oprah herself? Where does the nonrealism of the nineteenth-century closet dramas written by women intersect with the "super-realism" of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*?

Like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, another television phenomenon, the soap opera, has also catered to the shaping of women's identity and conflates public space and private domestic space. Soap operas began in the 1930s as domestic radio dramas aimed at an audience of housewives. While the "opera" tag lent the new genre a certain caché, the word "soap" pinpointed rhetorical purpose: soap operas were a medium for soap manufacturers to advertise their latest and greatest cleaning wonder to middle-class women whose mission was to keep the house "spic-and-span." To ensure women would return to the radio — and consequently the television set — on a daily basis, broadcasters

and sponsors wrote serialized dramas that gave ordinary women a peek into fictional lives frought with emotional and physical conflict. The goal of the soap opera: to sell domestic products by drawing the "simple housefrau" into this fictional, sudsy fantasy world. As the genre of the daytime soap opera fights for survival in the twenty-first-century, I think about the unpopularity of the closet drama in the late nineteenth-century and find myself faced with questions that address the similarities between, and the fates of, the two genres. What can we say about how the message of women's identity and agency expressed by the nonrealism of nineteenth-century closet drama written by women is reflected in the message of women's identity and agency expressed by the nonrealism of the soap opera? How does the soap opera reveal the socio-cultural ideologies, collective memories, and communal experiences that shaped twentieth- and twenty-first-century womanhood in the tradition of nineteenth-century closet drama written by women? How does the soap opera operate as a nexus of popular genres, much like the nineteenth-century closet drama served as a nexus of popular genres? Do the narrative strategies of the soap opera operate in the same fashion as the narrative strategies of the nineteenth-century closet drama written by women? What conclusions can we make about the genre stigma that plagued the nineteenth-century closet drama and shadows the twenty-first-century soap opera? How does the fact that many women in the twenty-first-century still hide their habit of watching daytime soap operas speak to the public/private performance aspect of the closet drama?

My work on nineteenth-century closet drama has compelled me to write three of my own closet dramas on Michael Field, to start on a quest for the genre's descendants, and to cast an eye backward toward the closet dramas written by early-modern women writers like Margaret Cavendish, whose flamboyant, often outrageous costumes were a strategic public distraction from her commentary on science and society. My work has compelled me to explore my own closets, to figure out why I wear certain hats (to recall the poem in the Preface to this dissertation), and why I have yet to cast aside others. Ultimately, my work has compelled me to action, to see potential for change in the darkest spaces and across generations. My work in this dissertation, then, looks beyond the recovery of a literary and theater history for nineteenth-century women writers toward a wider field of closet drama studies, in order to find new strategies with which to discuss and define a variable tradition of performance and social commentary.

Appendix

The Angels of the House, a closet drama by Michelle Lee.

This drama ran four nights in mid-April, 2006, staged in a classroom on the University of Texas at Austin campus. Dr. Susan Todd directed the production, leading a talented cast comprised of all women from the company called The Weird Sisters Women's Theater Collective based in Austin, TX. Much of the dialogue grew from material in the Michael Field archive in the Bodleian Library in Oxford or from Michael Field texts themselves, including the closet drama, *Stephania*, which I discuss in this dissertation. Several of Michael Field's poems were set to music and choreographed. I took great liberties with the relationship between Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, as well as with the relationship they had with members of their literary coterie. Although I definitely lean in the script toward imagining the two women having a physical relationship, I have not yet arrived at a definitive idea about the nature of their intimacy. This version is the final "acting" script, accounting for the minor inconsistencies in some formatting.

The Angels of the House

This play takes place on the cusp between Victorian and Edwardian England. Time is blurred; years have merged and, at the same time, have been forgotten. The set is full of lace, heavy drapery, ivy, books, art, a large birdcage, and busts of important men. There is tea, cream, and scones. There is silver and brass.

And there is paper: writing paper, newspaper — and ink. This is a story about two women who want to be seen and heard. This is a story about words becoming flesh. This play remembers Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, two poet-dramatists who were neglected for nearly a century and who are only now being re-membered in academia. This play speaks their words, and my own.

CAST

KATHARINE BRADLEY

EDITH COOPER

MICHAEL FIELD

The Critics:

GEORGE

BERNARD

ANNA

GRAY

MARY

The Parlourmaids:

SALLY

LILLIAS

JOSEPHINE

Theater Folk and Supporters:

JT GREIN

ROBERT BROWNING

LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON

BOY

Act 1

Scene 1. A sunroom in a brick townhouse called Number One, The Paragon, overlooking the Thames.

KATHARINE sits at a desk, making a scrapbook with zeal. She is chopping up newspapers and gluing/pounding the ragged pieces in a hardbound book.

EDITH is arranging roses in a vase on an end table with equal fury and attention.

BERNARD is somewhere offstage but visible. He may be speaking to another critic.

MICHAEL is on high, and still, like a statue on a mantelpiece. He is dressed like an archangel, in a breastplate and wings. He carries a sword.

KATHARINE: One review of our play. One! And what do the critics of The Academy have to say? That we make "grotesque blunders" in our history. What do they know?

EDITH: They know nothing about tragedy.

KATHARINE: But more importantly, they write as women and are treated as women.

BERNARD: Women's pictures, women's plays, women's books. What makes them temporarily so successful and eternally so wanting? — A.G. P. Sykes

KATHARINE: Poetesses, Female Pens, Lady Fictionists. They are set apart to stand delicately on pedestals.

EDITH: Waiting for hysteria and passion to overtake them.

KATHARINE: And for their feminine nature to be exposed and ridiculed. Talking wombs. Angel of the house.

EDITH (talking to herself, about herself): Trapped inside themselves. Longing to be free.

KATHARINE stops her fury, inspiration obviously dawning.

JOSEPHINE pours the tea with an eyeful of interest on the conversation.

KATHARINE: Do we not know the power of the gods? Have we not spent hours at University studying Zeus, Dionysus, Apollo, and those who hold the earth captive by their whims?

BERNARD: Tragedy requires testicles. — Voltaire

KATHARINE: Perhaps we need to write from our codpieces.

JOSEPHINE enters with tea on a tray. She is startled by the animated conversation but continues with her duties, setting the tea out on a side table. She listens intently, with a half-hearted attempt at discretion.

EDITH: We could write a cookery book or a travelogue or a novel of manners or domesticity. Perhaps then the public would hear what we have to say.

KATHARINE: I have a few things I would like to say to men.

KATHARINE picks up the scissors with a gleam in her eye. She snips the air before snatching the newspaper back up.

BERNARD: Man is the "doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender." His intellect is for speculation and invention, while a woman's is for "sweet ordering, arrangement, and domestic decision." — John Ruskin.

KATHARINE: While I do not wish to displace man from his role, I am not – and will never be – an angel of the house.

EDITH: We cannot give up. We must think of Christina Rossetti. Elizabeth Barrett Browning —

KATHARINE: I do admire their artistry, yet they do not write the things we want to write. We want to return literature to Elizabethan valor and nobility. To the unity of beauty and truth. To Art.

KATHARINE forgets her scrapbooking and stands, fired up and fuming.

KATHARINE: But more importantly, they write as women and are treated as women.

BERNARD: Women's pictures, women's plays, women's books. What makes them temporarily so successful and eternally so wanting? – A.G. P. Sykes

KATHARINE: Poetesses, Female Pens, Lady Fictionists. They are set apart to stand delicately on pedestals.

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EDITH (talking to herself, about herself): Trapped inside themselves. Longing to be free.

KATHARINE stops her fury, inspiration obviously dawning. JOSEPHINE pours the tea with an eyeful of interest on the conversation.

KATHARINE: Do we not know the power of the gods? Have we not spent hours at University studying Zeus, Dionysus, Apollo, and those who hold the earth captive by their whims?

EDITH: So?

KATHARINE: Don't you see? The deities would transform themselves, create their own destiny. Take a form that served their purpose.

EDITH: They would be themselves, yet something else entirely.

KATHARINE: Precisely!

EDITH: But we already created nom de plumes for ourselves. Arran and Isla Leigh. How would a new form change anything?

KATHARINE: We need to have one name, one voice.

EDITH: One name, one voice? Whose name and voice would we use? I suppose Arran Leigh. After all, you did publish a book under that name before you asked me to join you —

KATHARINE: No, Puss, a new name. A new voice. A new someone, like, like . . . our very own child.

EDITH: Or Frankenstein's monster.

KATHARINE: No, no — a god of art and a muse all in one. Think of it! The merging of Apollo and Dionysus. The birth of a tragic poet. Why do you frown so?

EDITH: How will this free us to write?

KATHARINE: Wordsworth says a poet is a man. Voltaire engenders tragedy with a handful of . . . *stones*. So we'll oblige. No more Female Pens.

JOSEPHINE has forgotten the tea. She is fascinated.

EDITH: What would we call our self?

KATHARINE: Something bold and resolute. A champion's name.

EDITH: Not George. There are far too many women – and men – with that name.

KATHARINE: And too many Arthurs.

EDITH: And Williams and Johns.

KATHARINE: We need the name of someone who would wield a pen as a sword.

EDITH: And who would fight with divine power.

KATHARINE: Michael.

EDITH: Michael.

JOSEPHINE mouths the name.

KATHARINE: And his last name —

EDITH: Something of nature. Something spacious and teeming with light.

KATHARINE: When you were a child, we called you Field.

EDITH: Field. Yes, yes, perfect. Michael Field. No more Arran and Isla

Leigh. No more Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, aunt and niece. No more standing on pedestals.

KATHARINE: We will finally be heard. Recognized at last. We must celebrate.

Their celebration could be conveyed several different ways - they could dance, attend MICHAEL with a flourish, or announce him grandly. They have created a god, an angel, an emissary.

KATHARINE: O Woman, all too long by thee

Love's praises have been heard;

EDITH: But thou to swell to minstrelsy

Hast brought no wealthn'ing word.

KATHARINE: Thou who its sweetest sweet can tell

Heart-trained to the tongue,

EDITH: Hast listen'd to its music well

But never led the song!

EDITH: And in the beginning, the poet was without form. And so Two Women made Him in their image and of their flesh.

MICHAEL bows to the women who summoned him to life.

KATHARINE: He is Michael Field. Let no man try to put asunder what two women have joined.

In her excitement, JOSEPHINE forgets her place. She doesn't see MICHAEL but she has witnessed a great spectacle. She applauds.

JOSEPHINE: Michael Field.

She quickly recovers, embarrassed.

KATHARINE: Josephine, don't stand there gaping like a fish. Bring us some champagne.

JOSEPHINE hurries away.

KATHARINE: We have so much to say and not a moment to lose. Grab a pen and some paper. Michael Field needs to speak.

EDITH: All we must do now is revise that scene where Nephele confesses to Callirrhoë her wild night in the forest with the Maenads and then our play will be complete!

First Nephele speaks —

Callirrhoë, oh! Hide me in thy gown;

It is so perilous a grief, a . . .

MICHAEL moves from his perch. Throughout the scene, he interacts with KATHARINE and EDITH, though he never touches them.

MICHAEL: a shame

EDITH: A shame, so wild and strange that I must tell thee of;

I shudder

MICHAEL: tremble

EDITH: I tremble, to remember it, and more

To tell it open-faced.

KATHARINE:

To the red bower

Of oleander, by the forest-stream,

Where thou and I in girlish solitude

So oft have hidden for . . .

MICHAEL: sweet conference

KATHARINE:

sweet conference, I went

And looking up, saw — not thy clear

Calm brows, Callirrhoë — a face as bright

As burnished shield

EDITH:

With hair that looked alive,

And cloak of shining hide. I lay as still —

KATHARINE:

As if a leopard crouched there, threw her spells on me,

EDITH:

And emptied my young heart as easily

As from a . . .

MICHAEL: pomegranate

EDITH:

And emptied my young heart as easily

As from a pomegranate one plucks the seeds.

KATHARINE:

And then she drew me, in caressing arms,

By secret pathways, to the temple-gates

Where stood Coresus.

EDITH: And then Callirrhoë says —

The new Bacchic Priest?

My father likes him not, thinks that the gods,

KATHARINE:

In scorn of mortal insolence, connive

At this terrific

MICHAEL: No, chaotic

KATHARINE: Connive at this chaotic fury in men's wits.

EDITH: And then Nephele says:

Callirrhoë, had you been there I think

You would have saved me!

MICHAEL and KATHARINE: Perfect!

EDITH: Not since the ancient bards has anyone told the story of Callirrhoë.

She is reborn.

KATHARINE: As we are with Michael Field.

Scene 2. GEORGE, BERNARD, GRAY, MARY, and ANNA noisily, jovially enter KATHARINE and EDITH's "parlour" from the "dining room." They have just experienced a lively meal. They are joking, singing. They toast.

CRITICS (singing): It's an Irish trick that's true

I can lick the mick who threw

The overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder!

GEORGE: To the Sirloin of England!

GRAY: May we always have wine in our glasses and the Queen in our pocket!

Throughout the scene, SALLY, JOSEPHINE, AND LILLIAS move with practiced ease around the guests, removing and replacing plates, refilling wine glasses. They are gracefully invisible, yet definitely aware of all.

BERNARD: When we are married, I must have two servants.

ANNA: I'm sure you shall, darling. One coming and one going.

Groans, laughs, etc.

GRAY: Wait, wait, I have a story: Poor young Bridget left Ireland with an excellent letter of recommendation from her last mistress, but on the way over, the letter fell into the sea. Distraught, she asked a friend to write another: "Dear Madam, Bridget Flaherty had a good reputation when she left Ireland, but lost it on the way over."

BERNARD: To Bridget!

ALL: To her reputation!

KATHARINE and EDITH join their guests. MICHAEL is with them. He is now dressed like a dandy, in a waistcoat, pants, a hat. He still wears his wings. He wanders about the group, playing tricks, amusing himself, before climbing atop a perch to oversee all.

MARY: And to our lovely hostesses!

GEORGE: I have discovered a new playwright. His name is Michael Field.

BERNARD: Exactly what we need in a city far too melodramatic as it is. Seems there's a playwright scribbling out his drivel on every corner these days.

KATHARINE: Tell me, Bernard, do you critics even taste the words someone wrote before carving them up and serving them al dente?

BERNARD: We know what isn't stale and overdone.

GEORGE: But Field isn't one of those He writes verse tragedies to be read, closet drama, like Tennyson and Byron and Shelley.

GRAY: Aren't those old chaps in a tomb somewhere?

MICHAEL: These gods are clever, aren't they? They disguise themselves, meet mortals unsuspecting in the market-place, and enjoy wholesome intercourse.

KATHARINE: So what else about this Field fellow, George?

EDITH shoots KATHARINE a curious, even quelling, look. MICHAEL leans in with interest.

GEORGE: I'd say he shows an almost Shakespearean penetration.

GRAY: That's got to hurt a man.

Laughter, drinking, merriment.

KATHARINE: What else do they say about him?

GEORGE: He's a poet of notable endowments.

KATHARINE: Do tell.

MICHAEL: Yes, tell.

ANNA: This country needs someone to breathe new life into drama.

MARY: I like musicals. In fact, I saw *Macbeth* just last week at the Lyceum.

KATHARINE: That is appalling. Next they'll have Hamlet doing the can-can. Now back to Field —

GEORGE digs into his coat pocket, produces a book, and begins ripping out the pages. KATHARINE looks pleased, while EDITH looks appalled by the action.

GEORGE: Here, see for yourself. The ring of a new voice among the English-speaking people.

BERNARD: Is this Michael Field paying you to publicize?

KATHARINE (with amusement, looking pointedly at EDITH): Doesn't sound as if he needs anyone to make him famous. What is his play about?

GEORGE: Glad you asked. Imagine it. Greece. A young girl named "Callir-rho" (mispronounces the name).

KATHARINE: Callirrhoë!

GEORGE: Callirrhoë — has captured the heart of Coresus, a priest of Diony-sus. They speak of the god. Gestures toward GRAY.

GEORGE: Read.

The servants react to the scene: SALLY rolls her eyes as if this is a regular occurrence; LILLIAS smothers raucous laughter; and JOSEPHINE is captivated.

GRAY (girly voice): "Yet I hold it true . . ."

KATHARINE: Not like that.

KATHARINE snatches the pages, dashes over to MARY, pulls her from her chair, and climbs upon it. A true performer! The critics and EDITH are astonished at KATHARINE'S behavior.

KATHARINE: "Yet I hold it true,

Divinity oft comes with a quiet foot."

GEORGE: To give a moment's counsel or to guard

From instant peril. When a god forsakes

Olympus to infuse divinity

In man's mean soul, he must confound, incite,

KATHARINE and MICHAEL:

O'erwhelm, intoxicate, break up fresh paths

To unremembered sympathies. Nay, more,

Accompany me further in my thought —

Callirrhoë, I tell you there are hours

When the hereafter comes and touches me

O' the cheek.

GRAY (gaze sweeping the table): Well, that was a mouthful of ham. And for dessert?

EDITH (annoyed): That is a wonderful idea. Josephine?

The servants' cue to return to their tasks. JOSEPHINE needs to be nudged by SALLY.

KATHARINE and MICHAEL:

I tremble at your god, for terrible

In wrath I fear him; though you speak him fair.

I surely know

That he provokes men to unnatural deeds,

And once stirred frenzied mother as a fell

Tigress to murder her deluded son.

GRAY: Quite an image for the digestion, I must say.

MICHAEL (to GRAY): That he provokes men to unnatural deeds.

ANNA: You must admit the verse has a nice ring to it.

KATHARINE: It does, doesn't it?

MARY: Is there a song?

KATHARINE: Why yes, yes, there is. A quaint little rhyme.

GEORGE: As a matter of fact, a faun does sing — How did you know?

EDITH: She's always been good at predicting the turn of certain plots. Anyone care for dessert?

BERNARD: I think the hour is getting rather late. Anyone care to share a hack?

GRAY: I think we just did, didn't we?

MICHAEL (to KATHARINE): But I am not a hack, am I?

KATHARINE: Michael Field is not a hack. Come. Let's read a few pages more. It's not too much past the hour.

MICHAEL: No, it is not too much past the hour.

EDITH: I'm certain Michael Field would be grateful for your devotion to his work. But if he is as good as you say, there will be another opportunity for trembling, murder, and, yes (smiling at Mary) song.

MICHAEL: Yes, trembling, murder, and song.

KATHARINE: We must do this again soon.

The group leaves the table in a flurry of conversation and farewell. JOSEPHINE collects the torn pages when no one, except LILLIAS, is looking and puts them in her apron. She exits.

Scene 3. KATHARINE goes to the sofa to unlace her boots, EDITH is untucking the silk scarf from her décolletage. Her mood is stormy. MICHAEL explores things in the sunroom. He tries on KATHARINE and EDITH's discarded clothes. Or, he could remain on his perch, just observing. A voyeur.

KATHARINE: Wasn't that exciting?

EDITH: You weren't exactly discreet. I thought for sure someone would discover our ruse with all your preening.

KATHARINE: What are you talking about, Puss? (KATHARINE goes to MICHAEL) Michael Field was the star.

EDITH: And you were standing on a chair, for heaven's sake. What if we are revealed? We will be patted on the head and our work will be placed back into shackles again. We will lose everything.

MICHAEL: Guard from instant peril —

KATHARINE: It's late and you tax yourself.

EDITH: You are too bold. And I wrote the faun's song. It isn't just a quaint little rhyme.

MICHAEL: Give a moment's counsel —

KATHARINE: You love me for my boldness. Have, ever since you were born.

EDITH: Yes, I have. Though you've never given me any choice.

KATHARINE: What do you mean by that?

EDITH: You've been everything to me. Aunt, mother, partner, lover. Now —

MICHAEL: Accompany me further in my thought ...

KATHARINE: Do you love me?

EDITH (to KATHARINE): I do.

KATHARINE: Stop being anxious. The public believes Michael Field is on par with Shakespeare. Have you read our fan letters?

She goes to the desk where she picks up an envelope from a pile and removes a letter.

KATHARINE: "Dear Sir, I am astounded at the abundance and richness of beauty in Callirrhoë. You have such genuine virile power. I am much struck by the force and freshness of dramatic impulse displayed in it — "

MICHAEL: You speak him fair!

EDITH: Do you ever imagine who they are writing to?

KATHARINE: I'm sure no one suspects the name belongs to two old birds like us.

EDITH: What does Michael Field look like, do you suppose, in their mind's eye?

All three preen in front of a mirror.

KATHARINE: Virile.

EDITH: Do you think so?

KATHARINE: Perhaps he has a moustache.

EDITH: A moustache? I don't see it.

KATHARINE: What do you see then?

EDITH (whispers): Me.

MICHAEL:

I tell you there are hours

When the hereafter comes and touches me

O' the cheek.

KATHARINE: Michael Field is us, sweet Puss.

EDITH: Yes, us.

KATHARINE: And with a name like Michael ...

EDITH: He would be ready to take on Satan himself.

KATHARINE: Come, Puss, let's go to bed. It has been a long night. I want to curl up next to you at last.

EDITH: I'll kiss the birds and be right up.

KATHARINE: I can wait.

EDITH: Go get the sheets warm.

EDITH blows a kiss to KATHARINE. KATHARINE exits. EDITH goes to the window, opens it, leans into the breeze. JOSEPHINE comes in with the intention of tidying up. She pauses by the door, not wanting to disturb, wanting just to look.

KATHARINE (offstage): Puss?

MICHAEL: She waits.

EDITH: I know.

KATHARINE (offstage): Are you coming, Puss?

MICHAEL: She'll come for you if you stay away too long.

EDITH: I know.

KATHARINE (offstage): Puss?

MICHAEL (to EDITH): In man's mean soul, he must confound, incite,

O'erwhelm, intoxicate, break up fresh paths

To unremembered sympathies.

Accompany me further.

When EDITH doesn't join him, MICHAEL stalks off in the direction of KATHARINE.

JOSEPHINE: Miss Cooper?

EDITH: You startled me.

JOSEPHINE: I'm sorry, Miss Cooper. Sally told me to turn down the lamps.

EDITH: Oh, I do that before I go up to bed.

JOSEPHINE: They read Michael Field's play at dinner.

EDITH: They did.

SALLY: Josephine! You finished in there?

EDITH: Good night, Josephine.

Jo exits. EDITH falls asleep in the window near the birds.

Scene 4. The dining room.

JOSEPHINE, SALLY, and LILLIAS are cleaning in some fashion after the dinner party.

LILLIAS: Another evenin' of pomp and poetry.

JOSEPHINE: Did you see Miss Bradley jump onto the chair?

SALLY: Yes, and those shoe prints are not going t'wash out of that silk. If they think I'm goin' ta —

LILLIAS: Those odd ol' birds will just buy another one. They can afford it. They can afford a lotta things. Like fine china and furs and summers abroad. Guess every woman needs her father or brother to die for her ta live the good life —

SALLY: Shush now and keep workin'. Besides, we got it good. The misses may pinch each other now and again, but the only thing o'mine getting pinched in this place is my feet.

JOSEPHINE: Do you think people know who they are?

LILLIAS: Who they are is women who can afford a place o'their own and a job that doesn't make their hands cracked and red. Did I say job? The only work they do is slap words ont' paper.

JOSEPHINE: I meant do people know they are that poet Michael Field. I think it's grand that they write books under a fake name.

LILLIAS: And it's so grand they have t'be a man for their own friends t'read them.

SALLY: Shush. You don't even know how t'read.

JOSEPHINE: I think their books are beautiful. As beautiful as they are.

SALLY: Oh, you don't know how t'read neither.

JOSEPHINE: As a matter of fact I do. Some.

LILLIAS: Well, la dee da. Queen Josephine knows her ABCs. Guess that's why you stole these.

LILLIAS reaches into JOSEPHINE's apron for the pages.

JOSEPHINE: Give them back.

LILLIAS: Think you'll get smarter reading this? Better off buying a penny romance. You'll learn something useful from that.

JOSEPHINE: I heard the Misses talking about how they learned everything from all those books in their library and from their mother and some cousins I think. Learned German and Latin and French and Italian and all about art —

SALLY takes the pages.

SALLY: You shouldn't be listening in on the Misses. (to LILLIAS) And don't get me started about puttin' your ear to the door. Would ya like to end up a scullery maid or a slavey for Ł5 a year?

LILLIAS: Sal's right, we shouldn't listen in on the Misses, especially not at night when the misses are in bed together. There's something strange about an auntie and her niece giggling under the covers —

JOSEPHINE (defensive): I sleep with my auntie when I visit home. A time or two she'll tell a joke and we'll laugh —

LILLIAS: Does your auntie tickle you beneath your nightie too? Call you her sweet Puss? Something isn't quite right —

JOSEPHINE: Miss Bradley loves Miss Cooper with all her heart. Worships her.

LILLIAS: Oh, I seen 'em worship each other once or twice in the garden by the fountain. They pretend they're Romans or fairies or somethin', singin,

dancin' and carryin' on under the full moon. They put flower crowns on their heads and run barefoot through the grass Anyway, you've only been here a few months. You'll see.

JOSEPHINE (awed): In the garden?

SALLY: Enough a'this wind-blowin', ya haybags. Take the plates and let's bid g'night. I'm sure there'll be more pomp and poetry tomorrow.

LILLIAS: Keep dreamin', Queen Josephine. Dreams are all yer gonna have.

They leave: SALLY purposeful, LILLIAS snickering. JOSEPHINE takes out one page from her apron that SAL or LILLIAS didn't find. She walks off, revering, reading, smoothing the page.

Scene 5. A blue light glows on a large bird cage. EDITH sits inside on the perch. She is dressed in a white nightgown, humming. This is Edith's dream.

GEORGE, GRAY, BERNARD, ANNA, MICHAEL, and MARY enter disguised in outlandish bird masks. They flap, walk, skitter like birds. The effect should be decidedly frightening. KATHARINE will enter separately.

EDITH: O homely birds, whose cry is harbinger

Of nothing sad, who know not anything

Of sea-birds' loneliness, rock round me when I die!

So sweet it were

To die by open doors, with you on wing

Humming the deep security of life.

GEORGE: Bravo, bravo.

ANNA: Is there more?

BERNARD: I think the play is done.

EDITH: Wait, I have things to say. I wrote a song. Michael, Michael, come here. You know the words.

MARY: Oh, I'd like to hear.

KATHARINE: Allow me. I love you with my life, t'is so I love you.

EDITH: That is my song —

JOSEPHINE enters with tea. She slowly fixes the cups.

KATHARINE (joined by MICHAEL): I give you as a ring

The cycle of my days till death

I worship with the breath

That keeps me in the world with you and spring —

EDITH: And God may dwell behind, but not above you.

MARY: That's lovely.

KATHARINE: You don't really love me.

EDITH: I do.

MICHAEL, GEORGE, BERNARD, ANNA, GRAY, and MARY (hissing, whispering): Do you? Does she?

KATHARINE: I took care of you when your mother died, when your father died. I loved you more than I could ever love anyone. You were more than a niece to me.

EDITH: I know.

KATHARINE: When you were a girl and we went to the sea, I saw the poetry and passion in your eyes. We were kindred spirits.

EDITH: You understood me.

KATHARINE: Then why aren't you happy, Puss? Why? I have taken care of you. I have given you my soul.

EDITH: It's too much. No, no, Love, come back. Take me to bed. I don't want to be alone.

MICHAEL, GEORGE, BERNARD, ANNA, GRAY, and MARY (hissing, whispering): You don't? She doesn't?

JOSEPHINE: Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!

She chases the birds away from EDITH.

JOSEPHINE: Would you like some tea, Miss Cooper?

EDITH: Let me out. Please.

JOSEPHINE (key in hand): I don't have the keys, Miss Cooper.

EDITH: My name is Edith, Josephine. Take me to bed.

JOSEPHINE exits. MICHAEL joins EDITH on her perch.

EDITH (singing): I give you as a ring

The cycle of my days till death

I worship with the breath

That keeps me in the world with you and spring

And God may dwell behind, but not above you.

Exeunt.

Scene 6. KATHARINE is breakfasting in the sunroom. EDITH's place is empty. There is a stack of mail on the table beside the tea service. JOSEPHINE is serving nervously. The silence is thick as clotted cream. KATHARINE simmers.

JOSEPHINE: Sugar?

KATHARINE: No, thank you.

JOSEPHINE: Cream?

KATHARINE: No, thank you.

JOSEPHINE: Scone?

KATHARINE: That will be all, Josephine.

JOSEPHINE: Where is Miss Cooper?

KATHARINE: Don't concern yourself, Josephine. She's . . . probably turning about the garden. You know how she loves to make things bloom.

JOSEPHINE: She hasn't been feeling ill, has she? I heard some awful creaking-about on the floorboards the past few nights like someone was pacing back and forth. When I can't sleep, I know I always —

KATHARINE: She's fine, Josephine.

JOSEPHINE: Are you fine, Miss Bradley? You look a mite piqued. I could —

KATHARINE: Miss Cooper is fine, Josephine, and I am fine, and I don't need any sugar or cream or scones.

JOSEPHINE moves to exit, obviously wounded.

JOSEPHINE: I'm sorry, Miss Bradley. Just let me know if you do need anything.

KATHARINE: Josephine, I need you to go.

JOSEPHINE leaves. KATHARINE tries to breakfast as if everything didn't just fall apart, but she is rattled. She takes up a pen & paper and writes furiously.

MICHAEL enters, sits at the table beside her. He is a reflection of her mood, her gestures. MICHAEL might read over her shoulder.

KATHARINE: I must speak

At every moment words of reprimand

That shake my courage; I must ever dread

Some new occasion for my wearied blame.

(to MICHAEL) I never say the right things. You must help me. You are part of her.

MICHAEL: O Woman, all too long by thee

Love's praises have been heard —

So listen to its music well

And ever lead the song!

KATHARINE: Yes, perhaps my Puss needs a tender word of wooing. I must find her.

KATHARINE and MICHAEL leave, hopeful - each for their own reasons. EDITH enters, dressed as if she were outside. JOSEPHINE enters with mail on a tray.

JOSEPHINE: Oh, good morning, Miss Cooper. A letter came in this morning for Michael Field, but it was addressed in care of you.

EDITH: Thank you, Josephine. It's from Robert Browning.

JOSEPHINE: By the look on your face, he is someone important.

EDITH tucks the letter in her dress pocket to savor later.

EDITH: He is a veritable god, Josephine. Do you read?

JOSEPHINE: I know some, Miss Cooper.

EDITH: Call me Edith, please.

EDITH goes over to the bookshelf and retrieves a volume. KATHARINE and MICHAEL enter but aren't seen.

EDITH: You must read his poems.

JOSEPHINE (looking at the book): "Men and Women."

EDITH: My favorites are "A Woman's Last Word" and "Any Wife to Any Husband." (reciting) "And yet thou art the nobler of us two.

What dare I dream of, that thou canst not do,

Outstripping my ten small steps with one stride?

I'll say then, here's a trial and a task —

Is it to bear? — if easy, I'll not ask —

Though love fail, I can trust on in thy pride.

JOSEPHINE: I couldn't take your book.

EDITH: I've seen you flipping through one or two on occasion. Now you can savor in private.

JOSEPHINE: I've never had anything private.

EDITH: I suppose not, with you, Lillias, and Sally all tucked under the roof at night.

JOSEPHINE: Oh, never mind about that, Miss . . . Edith, I'm used to sharing my things.

EDITH: Tell me.

JOSEPHINE: My parents died when I was ten and my aunt took me in, but she only has two rooms and 6 children and someone's always steppin' on somebody else or wearin' someone else's clothes or spillin' something — No, I can breathe here.

EDITH: Is that so? That must be nice.

JOSEPHINE: I was lucky to find a situation in a house like yours and Miss Bradley's. I knew a girl whose employer visited day and night when no one was lookin' and she'd constantly be having to take a good dose of salts and senna to make sure nothing grew, but eventually —

EDITH: Yes, you are lucky your cousin has demonstrated her competent character at Mrs. Haversham's. Your recommendation came highly. (pause) Enjoy

the book, Josephine.

JOSEPHINE: I will. Do you need anything else?

KATHARINE decides to make herself known. MICHAEL follows.

KATHARINE: There you are.

EDITH: Nothing more, Josephine.

JOSEPHINE exits. There is a moment of tense silence.

MICHAEL: Speak your courage.

EDITH: You ate breakfast without me.

MICHAEL: At every moment, she dreads new occasion for her wearied blame.

KATHARINE: Were you out walking? Your cheeks are pink.

EDITH: Mmmm. How much have you written this morning?

KATHARINE: Just a few lines.

MICHAEL: Do not forsake her.

KATHARINE: Would you like to hear? I can read it —

EDITH: I though we would finish the scene together.

KATHARINE: I'm sorry. It's a lovely day. Would you like to work in the garden with me? The roses are in need of pruning.

MICHAEL: She speaks you fair.

EDITH: I may stay in and write. Add to what you were working on.

KATHARINE: I could stay in with you.

MICHAEL: She trembles.

EDITH: Bring me some roses, love. Enjoy the fresh air.

KATHARINE: You will attend Mrs. Chandler-Moulton's salon with me at the end of the week? I'm dying to hear what she has to say about Michael Field and I don't want to go without you. You know what champagne does to me.

EDITH: Of course, I will attend.

MICHAEL: So sweet it were!

KATHARINE exits, happy.

MICHAEL hovers around EDITH, who takes the letter from her pocket.

ROBERT B (on or offstage): Dear Miss Cooper, Your publisher instructed me to write to Michael Field in your care. It is long since I have been so thoroughly impressed by indubitable poetic genius.

EDITH and MICHAEL: Poetic genius.

EDITH: And he wrote to me.

EDITH and MICHAEL: Yet high in mastery, born perfect man.

Soon as I touched my harp, how the gods ran

Ravished to listen!

ROBERT B: I would be honored to know, Miss Cooper, which of you owns particular pieces of this lovely verse, you or your aunt, whom I am told by your publisher also writes Michael.

EDITH: Which of you? You or your aunt?

MICHAEL: Born perfect man. How the gods ran ravished to listen.

EDITH: Dear Mr. Browning . . . (rushing to find a pen and paper, writing)

MICHAEL: Yes, dear Mr. Browning . . .

Exeunt.

Scene 7. Louise Chandler Moulton's literary salon

The salon is a flurry of social activity — perhaps a poetry reading, perhaps a song or two? The CRITICS gather in small groups and LOUISE greets them all with aplomb and charm.

KATHARINE and EDITH enter but hold an intimate moment away from the hubbub — maybe KATHARINE could even give EDITH a flower for her hair — a peace offering? A gesture?

MICHAEL admires an exceedingly large painting of the archangel Michael expelling Satan, then joins the gathering. He physically teases the CRITICS, who feel him but don't see him.

KATHARINE: You look lovely tonight.

EDITH: Thank you.

KATHARINE: No man will be able to take his eyes from you.

EDITH: And what of woman?

KATHARINE: Must I climb atop a chair and express my feelings properly?

EDITH: No, no — Come, sweet, let's join the fun.

GEORGE: Have either of you read the Bristol Times? Seems my praise of Michael Field was quite accurate. They say Mr. Field has few, if any, living rivals.

KATHARINE: I suppose the critics have finally acquired some taste.

GRAY: I read that Michael Field could be a woman. Or a man and a woman. Possibly even two women.

KATHARINE: Why that is scandalous. Do you really think two women are capable of imagining such bloody and violent tales?

GRAY: Have you met either my mistress or my wife?

EDITH: Do you truly think it matters who Michael Field might be if the work is compelling? Elizabeth Barrett Browning once said, "What is genius-but the

power of expressing a new individuality?"

GEORGE: You know, Oscar Wilde told me that it is often genius that spoils a work of art.

KATHARINE: Oscar spoke too much about too many things. He should have been a bit more discreet about his opinions and his interests. Maybe then he wouldn't have gone to trial.

GRAY: If ol' Oscar were here, he'd probably call Michael Field a poet that dare not speak his name. Or her name. Their name? Of course, Oscar didn't like naming names.

LOUISE notices KATHARINE and EDITH.

LOUISE: Who have we here? Miss Bradley and Miss Cooper! I'm delighted you could come to my salon. I have heard so many wonderful things about you.

KATHARINE: The delight is ours. It is you, Mrs. Chandler-Moulton, who has the exquisite reputation. Your salons are the talk of the town.

LOUISE: I beg to differ. You are the talk of the town.

KATHARINE and EDITH exchange curious looks.

KATHARINE and EDITH (different in tone and reaction): We are?

LOUISE: Well, soon will be at least. You don't know how much I've looked forward to your company this evening. I am a great admirer.

EDITH: Might we ask why?

LOUISE: We have a mutual friend, Robert Browning. I attended a recent dinner where he hinted about the marvelous collaborative secret Miss Cooper shared with him.

EDITH appears ruffled, KATHARINE stunned and tense.

KATHARINE (to EDITH): You didn't tell me you spoke with him.

EDITH: I answered one of his letters. I might have said something to the effect that —

KATHARINE: After you became so angry with me for all my preening. We will speak about this at home.

EDITH: He was so kind, I — It was Robert Browning.

LOUISE (to the group): Do you all know who you have here in your midst?

MICHAEL: Yet high in mastery, born perfect man.

EDITH: Mrs. Chandler-Moulton —

LOUISE: Call me Louise, please, dear Pen sisters —

KATHARINE: Louise, this is not the time —

LOUISE: Everyone, it is my greatest pleasure to present the poet Michael Field.

Everyone reacts with appreciation and surprise to LOUISE's unexpected revelation. KATHARINE glares at EDITH, who realizes the severity of the situation.

EDITH: Mrs. Chandler-Moulton, everyone, please. We are not —

MICHAEL turns from the painting, ready to protect his creators, ready to take his place as public poet.

MICHAEL: I am Michael Field. How the gods ran ravished to listen.

GRAY: So you two are the bloody geniuses? That explains some things.

EDITH: Well, yes, I suppose, but we —

LOUISE: Your humility is charming, though I'm not sure I understand the reason.

MICHAEL: And God may dwell behind, but not above me.

KATHARINE: We have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman's lips.

GRAY: "Oh, God, that I were a man. I would eat his heart in the marketplace." Aren't you making much ado about nothing?

LOUISE: Would you like something to eat or drink? You both look rather

flushed.

MICHAEL:

I must speak

At every moment —

EDITH: No, thank you, Mrs. Chandler-Moulton. We should be going home.

LOUISE: Please stay. I'm sure everyone would love to chat with you about your work.

BERNARD: Yes. Which of you writes the males?

EDITH: Really, it was lovely seeing you all, but we really must be going —

MICHAEL (to KATHARINE and EDITH): O homely birds, whose cry is harbinger —

LOUISE: I didn't mean to offend.

KATHARINE (to EDITH, more than LOUISE): You certainly didn't, Mrs. Chandler-Moulton. You only repeated what Mr. Browning told you. You had no idea it was meant to be a confidence. If you did, I'm certain you would have been more discreet. And as a matter of fact, I think I would like some champagne.

KATHARINE and LOUISE go off arm in arm toward a tray of champagne. EDITH looks lost and decides to leave. She asks a servant to bring her wrap and hat.

MICHAEL can't decide which woman to follow. Ultimately, he stays right where he is, with his public.

BERNARD: Women are so sensitive. There is no way they could continue their insipid masquerade as a man.

MICHAEL: You provoke men to murder —

BERNARD: Sooner or later, Michael Field will be seen for what they are.

MICHAEL: In terrible wrath, you should fear him —

MARY (counting on her fingers): One woman plus one woman can't make one man, can it?

MICHAEL: When you forsake Olympus —

BERNARD: There is a saying, "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs." Those two should commit that to memory.

ANNA: Are you saying we women can't define our emotions? Strange, I seem to know exactly what I'm feeling at this moment, Bernard.

BERNARD: Anna —

MICHAEL(to BERNARD): So sweet it were to die —

KATHARINE excuses herself with dignity and grace, though is obviously concerned about - and angry with - EDITH. Louise's servants should be nearby, trying to be discreet, obviously intrigued.

KATHARINE (to EDITH): I'll go home with you.

EDITH: I will hire a ride.

KATHARINE: Fine. Whatever you wish.

KATHARINE: What did you tell Mr. Browning?

EDITH: I told him who Michael Field was, but that the revelation would be utter ruin to our career, that the report of lady authorship would dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn.

KATHARINE: He certainly didn't waste any time. Probably spilled our news between the soup course and the roast.

EDITH: He does support us. He believes we have true talent.

MICHAEL: O homely birds, rock round me —

KATHARINE: We support each other, Puss. That's what makes Michael Field. We need to remember that if we don't want to lose everything.

EDITH: But do you want to know what Mr. Browning asked in his letter? Who writes which lines.

KATHARINE: I am not your adversary.

EDITH: Which one of us is Michael and which one of us is Field? Which one of us can be the righteous warrior delivering our holy words? And which one of us is earth, silent and underfoot?

KATHARINE: Is that what is bothering you? Both of us are Michael Field. We created him.

MICHAEL:

Thou who its sweetest sweet can tell

Heart-trained to the tongue ...

EDITH: Are you sure?

KATHARINE: Do you trust me?

They tentatively make peace as MICHAEL brings them together.

EDITH: I'm sorry. It's been a trying evening.

KATHARINE: Let's go home.

MICHAEL: I am Michael Field. Let no man try to put asunder what two women have joined.

Act 2

Scene 1. LILLIAS and SALLY in the dining room, back at The Paragon, polishing silver.

LILLIAS: It's been weeks and my friends are still talking about the salon over at the Chandler-Moulton's. Guess the days of those two ol' downies playing hide and seek behind a man are nearly over.

SALLY: You only wish you had the freedom to play as they do.

LILLIAS: I wouldn't play with my freedom. I wouldn't pretend to be something I'm not. I know who I am.

SALLY: Everyone in London knows who you are. Now stop yer blowin' and keep polishin'.

LILLIAS: You know full well they got masqueradin' words for women like them in certain uppity circles. Ladie Love. Sister. Wife. Husband. Mother. Aunt. Tomboy. Female Rake. Horsewoman. And a new one, hot off the cobblestones — Lesbian.

SALLY: Are you kiddin? Most people probably don't even think anything about the Misses, let alone give 'em names. In their world, they're as invisible as we are.

LILLIAS: Not what I hear. Friend'a mine told me that at a party, she overheard someone say that "if Miss Cooper and Miss Bradley play at being men, it's never in the uncouth unsexed manner which one is inclined to associate with, for example, the Ladies of Llongollen or Christina of Sweden." I may not know who those other ladies are, but I bet they're up to no good.

SALLY: Just like you.

LILLIAS: Where's Queen Josephine?

SALLY: Gettin' clothes off the line.

On another part of the stage, in the garden, JOSEPHINE is lying in the grass reading her book, clothes flapping in the breeze. Or she could be frolicking. She could even have a ring of dandelions in her hair. She could be mouthing words.

LILLIAS: Sure she is. Have ya seen her trying to read that book she's been carryin' around in her apron? Says Miss Cooper gave it to her.

JOSEPHINE:

I have but to be by thee, and thy hand

Would never let mine go, thy heart withstand

The beating of my heart to reach its place.

SALLY: Easy on the girl, Lillias. She wants more for herself.

LILLIAS: And I don't? Tell you one thing, if you caught me readin' you'd whip me up one side and down the other.

SALLY: And damn if I wouldn't enjoy it.

LILLIAS: Why, Sal. I didn't think you were into that sort of thing. There is hope for you yet.

JOSEPHINE:

When should I look for thee and feel thee gone?

When cry for the old comfort and find none?

Never, I know! Thy soul is in thy face.

SALLY: Easy, ya dollymop, don't get excited. I'm too seasoned fer ya.

LILLIAS: Yer seasoned all right. A tough ol' bird. Get Queen Jo's nose out of that book. She's liable to forget who she is and what she should be doing.

Scene 2. The sunroom.

MICHAEL: You harness my soul to the impossible. I run
Wildly across a waste that has no goal,
Spurred on by your ambition. To excite
My love of fame you urged me to the quest
Of Charlemagne's tomb; and now you see me raised
Like him a Roman Emperor, but like him
I sway a vacant kingdom.

(to EDITH) You crossed this out!

EDITH: I do believe Walter Pater is right when he says all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music.

KATHARINE: Music of the soul. Divine inspiration meeting human skill. Unity.

MICHAEL: Is this the Empire you have called me to? What is this mood?

He rifles through the piles of newspapers and their clippings. Obviously KATHARINE and EDITH have read them.

MICHAEL:

There are perfumes here

Full of the spices that grow old in tombs,

Soft penetrative scents that shaken out

Spread poison but are fatal being breathed

EDITH: It is beautiful to think that some of the life you've given me has gone out into the world, giving joy to so many.

MICHAEL (to KATHARINE):

Call the men to battle, swords

Clash the response; bid them arouse themselves

from foolish habit, customary sloth,

In bestial ignorance of your intent,

They trample, tear you.

Think but of me, no veiled divinity!

KATHARINE: I will never forget the day you were born. I was walking beneath a full moon and burst into tears when my brother told me.

EDITH: You knew me from the start.

KATHARINE: I did. You were a precocious, demented, sweet little demon.

MICHAEL: O agony. It is supreme.

Although these bosom-friends

As a young married pair, make interchange

Of counsel and fondness, one of them

watches the other, both mute in their decay.

Can you exorcise

And rid me of my perilous distraction

If I attend you daily in your cell?

KATHARINE: Should I have let you go all those years past? Should I have let you grow apart from me?

EDITH: I could never leave you.

KATHARINE: You had so many chances to marry. John Gray, Bernard Berenson. Arthur Symons. You enchanted all of them. You could have bore their children —

EDITH: And you were in love once, with Alfred Gerente. No, we are closer married than any we know. And my art, our art, is my child.

MICHAEL: O sorry sight! Whose child am I?

He picks up newspapers and looks through the holes (obviously reviews cut out).

MICHAEL:

I was too weak at first to apprehend

The mysteries beyond the knowledge forced

Upon me!

KATHARINE and EDITH approach each other, uneasy.

KATHARINE: My sister used to say I kept you too close.

EDITH: My mother never understood the depths of our love, our devotion.

No one does. We are bound by words.

KATHARINE and EDITH stand in apology. Slowly, they near each other but don't touch.

MICHAEL:

O believe

the things that ye were born for from this hour

Shall find fulfillment. Embrace your past,

Breathe over it and pray.

EDITH: I think I may go walk about the garden.

Josephine looks like she needs help with the linens.

MICHAEL: Do not go!

KATHARINE: Stay. Write with me.

EDITH: I won't be long.

KATHARINE: May I read what you've written?

EDITH: You don't need to ask, do you?

MICHAEL: Do not go!

EDITH kisses her before leaving, a light peck. KATHARINE picks up EDITH's writing and reads.

KATHARINE and MICHAEL:

A sense of ruin

Comes over me at the sight of such a sky,

So soon to close in darkness.

Search the stars,

Look deep into my destiny; so strange

A languor creeps upon me, I could say

Those powers that breed within a man's own breast

The very mood and temper of his fate

Move noiselessly within.

KATHARINE: What does she mean by this? A sense of ruin. Those powers that breed within a man's own breast move noiselessly within. (to MICHAEL) It's you. She wants you - alone.

MICHAEL: Embrace your past. Search the stars. Harness your soul to the impossible.

KATHARINE: I thought you would make her happy. But you are too much. I am too much.

MICHAEL: Peace, peace. Love is the frenzy that unfolds ourselves. Let go of this.

KATHARINE: How can I? She is pulling away.

She sinks to the couch, crying. MICHAEL sits with her, comforts.

MICHAEL: Peace, peace. She sleeps.

Scene 3. Lighting, perhaps blue as in EDITH'S dream, should signify the fantasy of Katharine's dream. A baby cries. GEORGE and MARY bustle in with a bundle. BERNARD, GRAY, LOUISE and ANNA rush over. They coo, fawn over the baby. KATHARINE wakes at the noise. EDITH enters through the window to sit with her birds.

GEORGE: I have discovered a new playwright.

MICHAEL:

A face as bright

As burnished shield

With hair that looked alive,

And cloak of shining hide.

KATHARINE tries to take the child.

KATHARINE: Give her to me.

MARY: Will you sing to her?

BERNARD: No, she'll smother her.

KATHARINE: I won't.

EDITH: Won't you?

MICHAEL: You will empty her young heart.

ANNA: She is but a child.

KATHARINE takes the child.

KATHARINE: I will watch over her and teach her and love her like no one else. She will be my Muse and I will be hers.

MICHAEL:

They are bound by such close ties
None can tell of either breast
The native sigh
Who try
To learn with whom the Muse is guest.

The CRITICS applaud.

BERNARD: Michael Field is a poet, if intensity of imagination and energy of expression can make a poet.

ANNA: As a dramatist, however, he has not learned, or worse, has mislearned the rudiments of his art.

BERNARD: In my opinion, 'The Father's Tragedy' was dismally, almost gruesomely ultra-masculine, and the same must be said, we fear of 'Brutus Ultor.'

ANNA: Don't forget 'Stephania.' The plot's of an indecency that only pure-minded elderly Victorian virgins could have imagined.

KATHARINE: Michael Field is no hack. I am no hack.

LOUISE: You're right, of course. You are divine.

KATHARINE drops the baby as she bows.

GEORGE: She killed the playwright.

KATHARINE: I didn't!

JOSEPHINE (grabbing the baby from the floor): She let her fall!

JOSEPHINE holds the baby, but eventually will give it to EDITH.

GRAY (examining the baby): Her? I thought it was a him. A them?

EDITH: She drove her away. She drove everyone away. Her parents, my parents. They all left her.

KATHARINE: But I was the one who took care of them when they got sick. When they left you. I was the one who held our family together. I was the one who loved them all —

MARY: An aunt and a lover should not be the same.

ANNA: It is quite immoral.

GRAY: Can two women be immoral together?

BERNARD: Which of them writes the males?

KATHARINE: Tell them, Puss. Tell them how you love me. How you pepper my brow with kisses every morning. How I am your wise old bird —

EDITH: I can't.

KATHARINE: You can. Tell them.

BERNARD: Obviously poetry cannot be written successfully in collaboration. A poet must sing in solitude to be heard.

KATHARINE: No, no, my Puss and I are one!

MICHAEL: I am Michael Field.

EDITH (pointing to KATH?): And you are Arran Leigh. And I . . . (forlorn?)

LOUISE: You are the talk of the town.

JOSEPHINE: You are a veritable god.

BERNARD: You are an angel of the house.

EDITH: And I cannot stay.

KATHARINE: Wait, Puss! Don't go! I need you. I will be the only one left. You are my heart, my life, my voice. With you I am not afraid —

MICHAEL:

Already to mine eyelids' shore
the gathering waters swell,
For thinking of the grief in store,
When thou wilt say "Farewell."

EDITH: Farewell.

CRITICS: Farewell.

JO and LOUISE: Farewell.

EDITH and the CRITICS, with LOUISE, exit.

KATHARINE:

I dare not let thee leave me, sweet,
Lest it should be forever;
Tears dew my kisses ere we meet
Fore-boding we must sever.

KATHARINE runs after them.

Scene 4. LILLIAS is cleaning the sunroom. She is surreptitiously admiring the paintings, the flowers, the books. JO comes in, doesn't see her, picks up a book.

LILLIAS: Which grim little fairytale is it this time?

JOSEPHINE is startled.

LILLIAS: Don't bother lookin' guilty. Everyone's seen you sneakin off to read scraps of paper or that book Miss Cooper gave you. Writing things down too. What do you have to say anyway? A parlourmaid.

JOSEPHINE: You seem to have plenty to say.

LILLIAS: That's because I've been around, Josephine. I know what life's all about.

JOSEPHINE: Don't you think there might be more?

LILLIAS: Thinking is a waste of time.

JOSEPHINE: Have you ever read one of their plays? Their characters are larger than life.

LILLIAS: Of course I've read one of their plays, Jo, between makin' the beds and cleanin' the lamp chimneys and polishin' all this brass and silver.

JOSEPHINE: Well, this one is about an empress who disguises herself as a prostitute to seek revenge on the man who murdered her husband.

LILLIAS: Who do you think we are, Josephine? We're told how we should dress - cotton print dress in the morning, black dress with white cap for afternoon – how we should talk – never let your voice be heard above a whisper around guests - how we should deliver the post - on a silver tray – and how we should stand - perfectly still when speaking to a lady. We must know our place, Josephine, and we must stay there. We don't have a choice.

JOSEPHINE: Maybe not, but you know we have it better than most.

LILLIAS: Then we should count our blessings, shouldn't we?

LILLIAS softens slightly toward Jo.

LILLIAS: So that story of the Misses you were talking about . . . Is it finished?

JOSEPHINE: Not quite. They're still working on it. I could read a little.

LILLIAS seems to consider the question for a brief moment.

LILLIAS: Can if you like. I can't shut my ears, now can I?

Exeunt.

Scene 5. The sunroom.

KATHARINE and EDITH move into the room arguing. EDITH snatches sheets of paper from KATHARINE's hands. Their appearances are slightly wild, disheveled. EDITH might even have feathers in her hair. The sunroom appears lived-in, as if the women haven't left for awhile. MICHAEL's clothes look too big for him.

EDITH: The scene isn't finished yet.

KATHARINE: You've been working for months. Read it.

EDITH: For Brutus's sake, let me be silent a little longer. You must not hear a word until I have done the gods' will with this great inspiration.

MICHAEL:

O doom, O endless years of fiery penalty!

I dare not think of what it were to live

Chained up from shaping forth my eager thoughts ldots

I sway a vacant kingdom.

EDITH: How are you coming on Canute?

KATHARINE: I am nearly done.

EDITH: Nearly? You are so easily distracted. I suppose you've begun something new?

KATHARINE: I, like you, am taking my time to work on perfection, sweet Puss.

EDITH (crumpling up the papers and tossing them toward a wastepaper bin): Perhaps I could help settle its fate.

KATHARINE (upset): And what of that modern thing you started? The new "Ibsen"?

They continue to bicker and charge through the room.

JOSEPHINE enters the sunroom to give KATHARINE and EDITH the mail: a few newspapers, letters. She hesitates, knowing it's bad news.

KATHARINE: More papers? What do the critics have left to say?

JOSEPHINE holds fast to the mail, but KATHARINE eventually wrestles the pile away and tosses them about the room. JOSEPHINE immediately goes to tidy up.

MICHAEL:

I swear no harm shall touch you

My wealth is your possession.

EDITH (fuming, pacing): We no longer have any friends that believe in our work. We are boycotted in the papers by the men to whom we have sent our books and by literary society. We do not walk with any of the great souls of the past. We walk alone. We have lost our friends. We have lost everything. I knew this would happen. She tears apart the room as if she is trying to find what they lost.

MICHAEL: Ask yourselves — have you not a deeper need than the stale rites of customary gods can satisfy?

KATHARINE (to JOSEPHINE): Don't touch that. Just go — arrange something else. Wash the linens! Order some sweets! Do what you are supposed to do!

JOSEPHINE exits.

MICHAEL: Look not so wild!

EDITH: You didn't need to frighten her.

KATHARINE: You don't need to give her books.

EDITH: She is not our downfall. Look at this place. Our art doesn't live outside of us. We do not live outside our art.

MICHAEL:
All art is ecstasy
All literature expression of intense
Enthusiasm.

EDITH goes to the birdcage.

EDITH: So much poetry, so many lives. Deirdre, Mary, Lucrezia, William Rufus, Rosamund — they do not leave us to go out into the world. We are

their birth place and their resting place. They have no other place to let their spirits go. Neither do we.

She opens the cage door. The birds escape.

KATHARINE: The birds!

As KATHARINE tries to catch the birds and put them back in their cage, JOSEPHINE hurries back in, breathless, excited.

KATHARINE: This is not a good time —

JOSEPHINE: You may want to read this letter straight-away.

KATHARINE: Give it to her and help me.

JOSEPHINE gives EDITH the letter, helps KATHARINE try to catch the birds. As EDITH reads the letter, JT talks from another part of the stage. JOSEPHINE runs offstage after a bird.

JT GREIN: My dear Misses Bradley and Cooper, I, J.T. Grein, founder of the Independent Theatre, am looking for a serious play to produce. A modern play. A story taken from the papers. I heard you might just have something.

KATHARINE (leaving the bird crisis): Our play. "A Question of Memory." Performed on stage. Now at last we are to speak with the living races of men

- to give them ourselves.

EDITH: The curtain will rise. The public will embrace us. All will applaud the voice of two hearts.

MICHAEL:

In you I see

Human emotion, action in the rough;

Through me, your agitated gestures shall become

Rhythmic in tidal refluence, your hoarse shrieks

Sonorous intonations.

Let me speak for you.

JT: It is your first foray into the modern.

MICHAEL: The past is blotted out.

JT: No Elizabethans touting blank verse. No Greeks spouting the divine.

MICHAEL: No blank verse?

Who dwell but themselves grow impotent;

They have no Past.

EDITH: We will be honored.

KATHARINE: We will be heard and seen.

MICHAEL: I have nothing of my own.

JT: As soon as you give me permission, we will begin auditions. I would love for you to become a part of it.

KATHARINE and EDITH embrace in celebration.

KATHARINE: This is our moment. We must get ready. We are staying in town.

KATHARINE and EDITH exit.

MICHAEL:

I find corruption in my very dreams,

They crumble at a touch. I have foregone

All honour and hope.

Scene 6. SALLY and LILLIAS are cleaning glass, knickknacks, plates, dust.

LILLIAS: Don't see why Queen Josephine gets to go to town and live in a flat with the Lady Loves.

SALLY: Look, Cinderella, they're prob'ly afraid of how many balls you'd be attendin' to after midnight.

LILLIAS: It's cuz'a the way she looks at them Horsies. All moon-eyed like their goddesses or something. She's no different than I am, except for the fact she reads a little.

SALLY: You only wished someone would gape at you that way.

LILLIAS: And you don't?

SALLY: Never said I wouldn't mind being a goddess a time or two.

LILLIAS: You might pass in the right light. With the curtains drawn.

SALLY: Promises, promises, ya Judy. Now pay attention to what yer doing or yer gonna break that.

LILLIAS: If those ladies are that queer here in the country, I wonder what they'll be like near theatre folk. What do you really think about the Misses?

SALLY: What do I think? I think they are livin' as it suits them. I'm not a god. I don't judge. I don't have that kinda power.

LILLIAS: And if you were a god?

SALLY: Wouldn't be here, that's for sure. Would you?

SALLY wanders off in her bluster, not really paying attention. LILLIAS daydreams, admires the room, the books.

LILLIAS: If I were a god, maybe I'd have time to run through the grass. Maybe I'd have time to roll around in pretty words . . .

SALLY: What's all that whisperin'? You know we don't have time for this-n-that.

LILLIAS: We never do.

Exeunt.

Scene 7. The sunroom.

KATHARINE and EDITH are making love - this could be shown through erotic dance or something more graphic. MICHAEL is in the shadows above them.

KATHARINE: We have watched our characters come to life all these weeks. We have watched them sigh and caress and tug on each other, love and disturb each other. We have lived our work.

EDITH: I hear your words come from strange mouths. I see you as a man, as a woman, as a soldier, as a child.

KATHARINE: As I see you.

MICHAEL: They do not see me.

KATHARINE: Are you happy? This is our moment.

EDITH: This is our moment.

MICHAEL: They do not see me.

KATHARINE: Tell me you are happy.

EDITH: This is our moment.

MICHAEL: See what I am - no ghost. A creature of warm blood.

As they continue making love, JOSEPHINE creeps into the room. She is dressed for bed, perhaps even has a quilt pulled tight over her head. She is a voyeur.

MICHAEL:

Having no tears to shed, with no regrets

Remaining merely as a monument

Contending hosts have clashed against ...

KATHARINE and EDITH:

From thee untwined

I shall but wander a disobedient sprite,

Until thou wake me

With thy kiss-warmd breath,

and take me

Where we are one.

JOSEPHINE gasps at the intimate moment. EDITH and KATHARINE look up, amused by the intruder. Embarrassed, JOSEPHINE makes herself small, and hopefully, invisible.

EDITH: Josephine?

KATHARINE and EDITH exit,giggling. JOSEPHINE falls asleep under her quilt.

Scene 8. Lighting should indicate a break in reality, much like the other dreams. JO's dream should evoke a garden of nymphs, of Muses, dressed all in white. SALLY, LILLIAS, MARY, and ANNA touch, coax, and dance around JOSEPHINE.

SALLY and LILLIAS — MARY and ANNA to join (singing):

Silver movements, silver voices

Women moving to & fro

Where the garden-spices blow

At the June day's summer close —

Daughter, mother,

Women gracious to each other —

JOSEPHINE: You're making too much noise. The misses will hear.

ALL except JO:

Now the plucking of a rose,

Now the dropping of a hand

Soft upon a flower-stand.

KATHARINE and EDITH enter.

JOSEPHINE: The misses will see.

LILLIAS: Isn't that what you want?

EDITH: Yes, isn't that what you want?

KATHARINE and EDITH (singing to JO, dressing her in flowers):

Now a goddess stooping low,

Now an angel glancing up;

Now the raising of a head

Lovely as the lifting-up

Of a flower from its cup.

KATHARINE: You are lovely, are lovely, but unknown. What is your name?

ANNA and MARY: Her name.

LILLIAS: Ladie Love.

ANNA: Lady Fictionist.

SALLY: Sister.

EDITH: Wife.

KATHARINE: Husband.

MARY: Mother.

EDITH: Aunt.

LILLIAS: Female Rake.

EDITH: Female Pen.

SALLY: Horsewoman.

JOSEPHINE: Parlourmaid.

SALLY: Do you want more, Josephine?

LILLIAS: You have a choice, Josephine.

EDITH: Be bold and resolute.

ANNA: Be seen.

MARY: Be heard.

KATHARINE: Create your own destiny.

ANNA: Create a new life.

JOSEPHINE: Can I?

EDITH: You can.

LILLIAS: You can.

JOSEPHINE: But you said —

LILLIAS: You can.

JOSEPHINE dances with the women.

ALL:

Silver movements, silver voices

Women moving to & fro

Where the garden-spices blow

Where sweet women race together,

Softly moving, speaking low.

Exeunt.

Scene 9. The CRITICS enter the Independent Theater; they settle into their seats with grumbling and small talk. JT enters with panache and speaks to the audience. MICHAEL watches from above.

JT: Welcome, welcome. It gives me great pleasure to see such an eager and enthusiastic crowd tonight. As you are well aware, here at the Independent, we pride ourselves on modern and avant garde theater. Tonight we have a special treat, a new work by Miss Katharine Bradley and Miss Edith Cooper, better known as Michael Field.

The CRITICS have a mixed reaction to the announcement and curse GEORGE for bringing them to a Field play. To indicate the play occurring, a BOY will flip and read placards.

BOY: "JT Grein and the Independent Theater Present Michael Field's A Question of Memory."

BERNARD: Not another Field play, George.

GEORGE: But this one's on stage.

GRAY: Even worse. Now we can't rip out pages.

BOY: "Written by Miss Katharine Bradley and Miss Edith Cooper. And Featuring Mr. Acton Bond as Ferencz and Mrs. Charles Creswick as Thekla." (new card) "Act One."

The CRITICS sigh as the act moves along.

GEORGE: It wasn't bad.

GRAY: It wasn't good.

MARY: Maybe if there was a s-

BERNARD: No, Mary, a song wouldn't have saved them.

BOY: "Act Two."

ANNA: Did someone forget their lines?

GRAY: It would've been worse if they hadn't.

BOY: "Act Three."

The CRITICS are now snoring.

BOY: "The End."

The CRITICS wake up, clap half-heartedly.

JT: I hope you enjoyed tonight's production of "A Question of Memory." It gives me great pleasure to introduce its authors, Miss Katharine Bradley and Miss Edith Cooper, otherwise called Michael Field.

As KATHARINE and EDITH take their bows, JT hastily leaves the stage. The CRITICS begin to leave. KATHARINE and EDITH look dejected.

GEORGE: What ingenious ladies!

BERNARD: And how earnest and quaint their play.

GRAY: Especially the bit about the executions. Women have such a sentimental flair with war.

JOSEPHINE comes with their furs and opera cloaks. KATHARINE and EDITH look at the audience, despondent. They seem as if they don't know what to do, where to go. MICHAEL is all about I-told-you-so.

EDITH: It is worse than before.

GRAY: Maybe Mary was right. Audiences need a good song.

BERNARD: And maybe they should have kept their drama in the closet.

MICHAEL:

Do you see what you have done?

It would please me best

You declare allegiance to the god,

And make yourselves subservient to my worship.

It is not too late.

KATH & EDITH look lost. All the CRITICS save MARY & GEORGE leave the stage.

MICHAEL:

Tremble not —

My office is to save and purify

To lift from degradation.

EDITH: I suppose we're not meant for the stage.

GEORGE: You must remember that present literary tastes are feverish. Your themes are drawn from history. Too remote for comfortable digestion.

JOSEPHINE: He's right. You can't give up.

They all glare, gape at her.

GEORGE: She's right. You can't surrender now. But maybe you should think about a new style.

EDITH: But our play was modern. We gave up the Shakespeare, the Greek.

GEORGE: And came up with something Hungarian.

MARY: Not everyone enjoys goulash. Not everyone knows what goulash is.

KATHARINE: It was the Hungarian Rising of 1848. A man's family was killed and he went mad.

GEORGE: Some people may not find that . . . appetizing.

KATHARINE: And I suppose women can't do revolutions, or risings, as well as men.

MICHAEL:
Search the stars,
Look deep into my destiny —

GEORGE: The English are wholly inartistic. They ruin all their poets, for they only praise what they find easy to understand. Do not give up hope.

Silence, awkwardness.

EDITH: We found rats in the house yesterday.

MARY: Rats?

KATHARINE: Seems nothing of ours is sacred.

MARY: Perhaps it's your name.

EDITH: What name?

MARY: Michael Field.

MICHAEL: I am Michael Field.

GEORGE: She may be right. I have seen it make grown men wince. Or, more often and more importantly, do nothing at all.

KATHARINE: That is because Michael Field is now seen as "two old spinsters trying their fragile hands at writing."

MARY: More like dried up old-fashioned eccentrics.

KATHARINE: Right. Much more elegant.

MICHAEL:
Think of all that I inherit and combine
Think of the fiery heart in me

EDITH: Shakespeare did say, A rose by any other name —

KATHARINE (slightly encouraged): — is something else entirely.

MICHAEL:
I am a plan, a work of some strange passion
Life has conceived apart from Time's harsh drill,
A thing it hides and cherishes to fashion
At odd bright moments to its secret will:

KATHARINE: We wrote under other names once.

EDITH: Arran and Isla Leigh.

MARY: Who?

GEORGE and MARY leave hurriedly.

MICHAEL:

I have plunged deep in wars

Have summoned councils —

KATHARINE: Perhaps names are detrimental to art.

MICHAEL: Oh unjust —

EDITH: We must get rid of the rats in our house.

KATHARINE and EDITH leave. JOSEPHINE looks around the theater with awe.

MICHAEL: Am I now a rat? No, you make me feel like a strange creature, rising to the sea's surface, previously unseen by human eyes, barely grazing the light of the sun before sinking once again to its cold dark depths. Or a simple plan. A rose. A rose.

JOSEPHINE pretends she is an actress. She clears her throat, lifts her chin, straightens her posture. She plays to a house of admirers.

JOSEPHINE: My life will not be determined by the people who love me, but by the people I love. When I love, I grow wonderful to myself. I am a woman yet not a mere spectator.

JOSEPHINE blows kisses and bows to imaginary applause then runs to catch up with her mistresses.

MICHAEL:

Yet not a mere spectator.

Passive from the first

I yielded to my ravishers, and when

They left me fell musing to my revenge.

Act 3

Scene 1. The sunroom.

The silence belongs to a couple deep in thought and afraid to voice their worry.

KATHARINE: I hear it might rain tomorrow.

EDITH: It will be good for the roses.

KATHARINE: Yes, good for the roses. I guess we should go to bed.

EDITH: It has been a long day.

Silence. The anxiety, uncertainty should be palpable. MICHAEL is in the shadows, stealthy, waiting.

KATHARINE: Do you think we will be remembered in 50 years?

KATHARINE: Do you think he will be remembered?

KATHARINE: What do we do now? What do you want to do?

EDITH: The only thing I have ever wanted to do. Write.

KATHARINE: We can reinvent ourselves.

EDITH: Again? What is left for us?

KATHARINE: Michael Field was not as we imagined, was he?

MICHAEL approaches KATHARINE, threatening, aggressive. A hiss.

MICHAEL: I am exactly how you imagined.

KATHARINE: No, you aren't.

MICHAEL: You created me so everyone would see you. Hear you. You used me to speak.

KATHARINE: You ruined everything.

MICHAEL: I was your child, your ideal. Your messenger. I am the angel you couldn't be.

KATHARINE: Because of you, we were thrown from Paradise.

MICHAEL: I am damned, damned in my very destiny. You used me.

By this moment, MICHAEL should have KATHARINE alone, maybe cornered with his sword pointed at her throat. EDITH moves to protect KATHARINE.

EDITH: You exist because of us. We imagined you. We created you.

MICHAEL: I am more than what you could imagine. I am God's emissary.

EDITH: You were our emissary.

MICHAEL:

I could say

The powers that breed within a man's own breast

The very mood and temper of his fate

Move noiselessly within.

I am your word made flesh.

EDITH: You were.

MICHAEL (to KATHARINE): Is this the end? I recoil. Who is it that put a brand on me while I was absent? I came to you a moody dreaming child. You gave me knowledge, played me about the past like summer lightning —

KATHARINE: You must go.

MICHAEL: I am Michael Field. You twain are doomed. Your power shall wane without me.

EDITH: You must go.

MICHAEL: I am the angel of the house.

EDITH: You are exactly who we didn't want to be.

EDITH tears his wings, wounding him,
hurting him.

MICHAEL:

Ah, me!

How brutal, coarse, and ignorant I stand

Beside this sweet stray in humanity. Call the men to battle.

(to EDITH) I can free you.

EDITH: I can free myself.

KATHARINE is still uncertain.

KATHARINE: It is a full moon. Like the night you were born. I was so afraid I'd drop you. Hurt you. I still am.

EDITH: You have always watched over me.

KATHARINE: Held you too tight.

EDITH: Maybe. I have allowed you to.

MICHAEL: I kneel down, swear to be your most faithful —

EDITH: I could have flown at any moment. I chose to stay. I choose to stay.

MICHAEL: And if I attend you daily in your cell?

EDITH: We will write. We will create anew.

KATHARINE: Are you sure?

EDITH: Divinity oft comes with a quiet foot.

MICHAEL: Think but of me, no veiled divinity. I can be who you want me to be.

EDITH (to KATHARINE): Do you not remember the power of the gods? The deities would transform themselves, create their own destiny. Take a form that served their purpose.

MICHAEL: I have no parentage - all that I am, I cease to be. I am the last of a dying species.

He runs off, injured.

EDITH: We are finally free. He can finally be who we want him to be. A voice for our words. A voice for us. Our souls will be the things seen and heard by all, not our bodies, not our wombs. We will be formless, as deities are just before they become thunder, stallions, swans. Like shadows around men, we will seduce, charm, anger, and imagine. We will give and take as we wish.

KATHARINE: They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of him as somewhat of a recluse.

EDITH: Yes, perhaps all gods need to be anonymous. Maybe that is where their power lies.

Scene 2. A dinner party.

The Chorus of CRITICS gathers. In the center of the table, a vase full of huge white angel plumes instead of flowers.

GEORGE: I have discovered a new playwright.

Groans, laughter.

BERNARD: Exactly what we need to go down with our sherry. Who is the melodramatic sot this time?

GEORGE: He is a recluse. Was a recluse.

GRAY: Then how, pray tell, did you discover him? Reading between the lines?

GEORGE (pulling a book from his coat pocket and jumping to his feet as in Act 1, scene 2): Reading this. *Queen Mariamne.*

MARY: Is there a song?

BERNARD: Shall I move dear Mary or will we not be performing on the chairs this evening?

GEORGE (ignoring all): A hidden hoard of his manuscripts were found in Rome, apparently after a long illness.

GRAY: Well, in the case of an ill manuscript, perhaps it's better he was lost.

ANNA: Come to think of it, I heard the man was buried in an unmarked grave.

GRAY: Must be too dark to write in there.

ANNA: How do you know he wasn't a woman?

GRAY: Or two?

MARY: How could a dead man be a woman?

BERNARD: Impossible. What is this recluse's name?

GEORGE: He is nameless.

Ooooos and ahs.

BERNARD: Everyone has a name.

GEORGE: Apparently he was the author of Borgia.

BERNARD: Oh yes, Borgia. No one put their name to that.

ANNA: Seems to me it got some fair reviews.

GRAY: I suppose we could do with a little humor this evening. Rip out the pages, George.

GEORGE gives the pages to MARY. Somewhere offstage but noticeable, JOSEPHINE is also reading.

MARY (reading) and JOSEPHINE: In my womanhood, I was a poet I possessed the world.

Perhaps KATHARINE and EDITH will be onstage — dancing as nymphs alone or at their desk, reading what they have written.

KATHARINE and EDITH:

And beyond — a king lies dead.

But that land is blest forever,

Safe & healed, & happy so

Where sweet women race together,

Softly moving, speaking low.

END.

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Vita

Michelle Lee, née Stoddard, grew up in a Maryland suburb, where she borrowed stacks of books from the public library, played "pretend" in the woods behind her house, devoured her mother's homemade cookies, and watched her father paint. After receiving her B.A. in English and graduating summa cum laude from the University of Maryland, Michelle worked in public relations for education-oriented nonprofit organizations, then — upon marrying an Air Force officer and moving across the country — pursued a career in freelance writing. Several years, several projects, an agent, and an e-novel later, Michelle took her husband's advice and went back to school, accepting a spot in the M.A. in Creative Writing Program at UT. While studying the craft of fiction-writing, Michelle decided to go further in her studies and applied to the Ph.D. in Literature program at UT. During her Ph.D. career, Michelle published across genres, including poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and wrote a handful of plays about her beloved Michael Field.

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